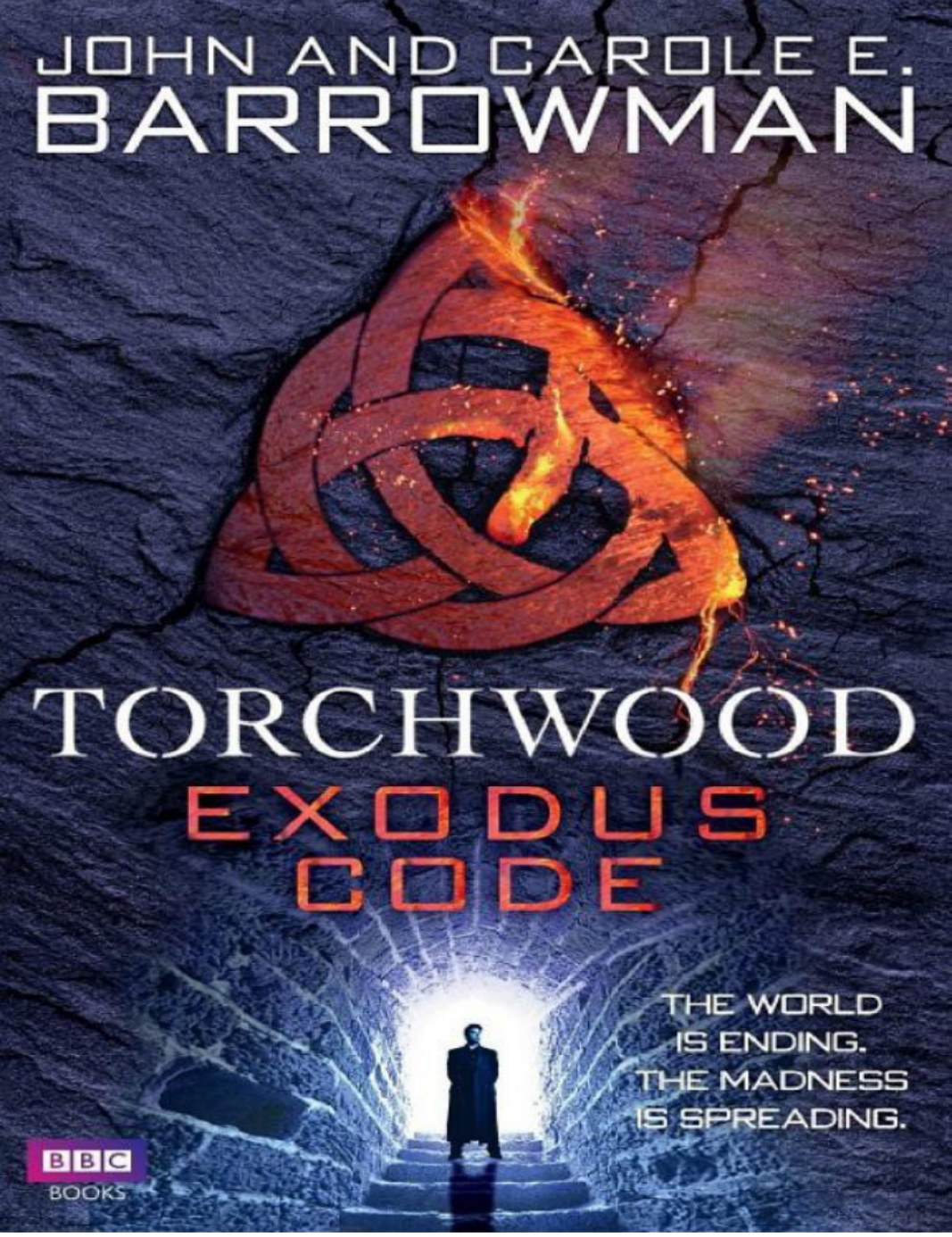
JOHN AND CAROLE E.
BARROWMAN
TORCHWOOD
EXODUS
CODE
THE WORLD
IS ENDING.
THE MADNESS
IS SPREADING.
BBC
BOOKS

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Authors

Title Page

Dedication

Epigraph

Part One

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Part Two

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

Chapter 37

Chapter 38

Chapter 39

Chapter 40

Chapter 41

Chapter 42

Chapter 43

Chapter 44

Part Three

Chapter 45

Chapter 46

Chapter 47

Chapter 48

Chapter 49

Chapter 50

Chapter 51

Chapter 52

Chapter 53

Chapter 54

Chapter 55

Chapter 56

Chapter 57

Chapter 58

Part Four

Chapter 59

Chapter 60

Chapter 61

Chapter 62

Chapter 63

Chapter 64

Chapter 65

Chapter 66

Chapter 67

Chapter 68

Chapter 69

Chapter 70

Chapter 71

Chapter 72

Chapter 73

Acknowledgements

Copyright

About the Book

From *Torchwood* star John Barrowman, and Carole Barrowman, an epic

thriller that finds Captain Jack and Gwen in a race to save humanity

itself.

It starts with a series of unexplained events. Earth tremors across the globe.

Women being driven insane by their heightened and scrambled senses. And

the world is starting to notice – the number one Twitter trend is

#realfemmefatales.

Governments and scientists are bewildered and silent. The world needs

Torchwood, but there's not much of Torchwood left.

Captain Jack has tracked the problem to its source: a vil age in Peru, where

he's uncovered evidence of alien involvement. In Cardiff, Gwen Cooper has

discovered something alien and somehow connected to Jack. If the world is to

be restored, she has to warn him – but she's quickly becoming a victim of the

madness too...

About the Authors

John and Carole Barrowman have been science fiction fans since the third

Doctor. They've col aborated on two volumes of John's autobiography, a comic

strip adventure with Captain Jack in the official *Torchwood* magazine, and a

fantasy children's novel, *Hollow Earth* .

John became Captain Jack Harkness in *Doctor Who* in May 2006 and

appeared in eleven episodes of the hit show before taking the lead role in

Torchwood. John has had starring roles on the stage and on television,

including his popular BBC entertainment show *Tonight's The Night*.

Carole is Professor of English and Director of Creative Studies in Writing at

Alverno Col ege in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She writes a monthly crime fiction

column and regular reviews and features for newspapers. She contributed a

chapter to the Hugo-award winning non-fiction anthology *Chicks Dig Time*

Lords.

TORCHWOOD

EXODUS CODE

John Barrowman

and

Carole E. Barrowman

BBC BOOKS

For al the Woodies in the world and beyond.

‘He may be above;

He may be below;

or, perchance, abroad in space.’

Inca prayer

‘Time moves in one direction, memory in another.’

Wil iam Gibson

Part One

1

Southern Coast of Peru, 1930

A HAWKER HORNET banked out over the Pacific, cut a tight circle, and swooped

inland over the red cliffs of the southern Peruvian coastline.

‘It’s about to get rough, my friend,’ said the pilot.

His passenger secured his goggles over his eyes then adjusted the straps

of his shoulder harness. A dense morning mist wrapped around the top of la

Madre Montâna, reducing the pilot’s visibility to inches and the temperature in

the open cockpit to bloody freezing. The wind gnawed at the passenger’s face

and neck. Shivering, he slid down in the seat, turning up the col ar on his coat,

but it wasn’t enough to warm him or shrug off the uneasiness that had been

swel ing in his gut since they’d taken off minutes ago from the airstrip at

Castenado. The feeling wasn’t dread so much as discomfort, a sharp piercing

pain in Captain Jack Harkness’s gut.

The Hornet’s wooden frame bucked in the air currents of the southern

Pacific. Jack’s stomach flipped. A sudden drop lifted him off his seat, thumping

his head on the cross bar of the wings.

‘What is it you want to show me that’s worth this?’ Jack yel ed over the

noise of the propel ers.

‘I promised you amazing, didn’t I?’

Jack grinned at the handsome pilot. ‘Renso, we already were.’

Shifting forward, Renso guided the Hornet towards the jagged cliffs that to

Jack looked like the gaping maw of a brooding monster. He’d seen far too

many of those in his time. Jack sighed, slouching down in the rickety bucket

seat.

‘Ready?’ Renso asked.

‘Does it matter if I’m not?’

Renso laughed, flying the Hornet straight into the cloud of mist. Almost

immediately the smal bi-plane was shrouded in a damp cloak of grey. Jack

shivered again and the sensation that earlier he couldn’t name uncoiled itself

from his stomach, crawled into his chest, up into his throat, settling painful y

behind his eyes. Jack put his head down and moaned.

Food poisoning, he thought. Had to be.

‘Al right back there, amigo?’

Cold sweat was beading on Jack’s forehead, and a burning sensation was

knotting the muscles at the base of his neck. His eyes were stinging.

‘Fine. I’m fine.’ But Jack was far from it. In fact, he hadn’t been feeling

anywhere close to fine since he arrived on the South American coast at

Renso’s request two days ago.

Seconds later, the plane shot out the other side of the fog into a shocking

blue sky. The scene displayed beneath Jack jolted him from his reverie, and he

stared down into the basin of the mountain.

‘What the hel is that?’

‘You mean you don’t know?’ said Renso. ‘I thought if anyone would, it’d be

you.’

2

JACK GAZED IN astonishment at three vast glowing rings of igneous rock pulsing

deep inside the bowels of the mountain. He knew there’d been an eruption

back in January and, at first, he thought the rings were smouldering magma

from that. But the closer the Hornet dipped, the more clearly he could see that

each ring was seething, spinning, shifting in and out of the other. He could hear

their syncopated rhythm in his head. It sounded as if the mountain had a

heartbeat. The effect was mesmerising.

‘Can you get me down there?’ he asked, forcing his attention from the rings.

‘No place to land,’ said Renso. ‘It’d be a long hike to get up here from the

nearest canyon. But I can manage closer.’

Renso pul ed back on the stick, the propel ers whined, the engines coughed

and the Hornet lurched violently. For a beat, Jack thought the plane had died,

but then Renso corrected his manoeuvre, punching the Hornet into a vertical

climb.

‘What’re you doing?’

‘Trust me, Jack. This wil get you closer.’

‘Not now, Renso. I don’t think I can take any more of your tricks.’

‘You love my tricks,’ grinned Renso. ‘Brace yourself!’

With al the skil s of the best WWI dogfighter Renso had once been and the

crop-dusting pilot he now was, he flipped the Hornet, cut its engines, and sent

them into free fal . The plane spiral ed dangerously towards the face of the

plateau and the spinning rock.

‘Stop showing off. Bring her up, now!’

‘Don’t be such a backseat flyer, Jack,’ laughed Renso, pul ing back on the

stick. The Hornet nosed up, inches before its wings strafed the pitted plateau.

‘Better?’

‘Not much,’ whispered Jack, his breathing laboured. Every exhalation was

squeezing his chest. It was the air, he realised; it was even thinner up this high

than he'd reckoned. Dropping his goggles around his neck, Jack wiped his

eyes with his coat sleeve. Leaning out of his seat, he peered down inside the

basin of the mountain. He pul ed a notebook from his coat's inside pocket and

began to sketch the rings. As he sketched, each stroke of his pencil set off a

chime in his head, like the distant notes of a half-remembered tune. Jack

frowned, the drawing dancing before his eyes. The closer he looked, the

faster the rings appeared to spin through each other. Cautiously, Jack touched

the paper with the point of his pencil, feeling it contort like India rubber,

sending the rings dancing from the page into the air before settling down.

Jack's vision cleared as he stared at the pattern.

'They look like hieroglyphs,' said Jack, scribbling intently. 'Kind of familiar.

My ancient Egyptian isn't so hot these days.'

Renso raised an eyebrow. Like a lot of things Jack said, he didn't know if it

was an outrageous lie, or an even more outrageous truth. He glanced down at

the pattern smouldering in the landscape beneath them. 'Egyptian? Given the

land we're flying over, it's more likely to be Incan.'

‘Yeah,’ agreed Jack. ‘Could be.’ As he talked, his hand sketched on, every

movement of the pencil playing out more of that tune in his head. Despite the

buffeting wind and the jostling of the plane, Jack drew on.

Renso glanced back. Jack’s notebook pages were fil ing with words,

geometric shapes, drawings of what looked to Renso like a series of odd lines

and circles and lines of musical notes. It looked as if someone else was

control ing his hands; they were moving furiously across the pages. Renso

knew Jack wel enough not to question his capabilities, but stil something was

not quite right about Jack’s demeanour.

When Renso looked into the maw al he could see was an odd smouldering

rock formation. No movement. No pulsing and certainly not forming any of the

shapes that Jack was sketching. Keeping the Hornet as tight to the basin as

he could, he asked, ‘Jack, are you sure of what you’re seeing?’

‘If you’re asking do I know what this is and what it means, then no,’ said

Jack. ‘Not yet. I’ve seen al sorts of things, met al kinds of life. Don’t think I’ve

ever met anyone that could carve something like that out of the inside of a

mountain, though.’

As he spoke, Jack realised that that was exactly what he was looking at.

‘One thing I do know, though – whatever it is, whatever it means, it’s been in

that mountain for a very a long time.’

‘How do you reckon that?’ Renso’s voice sounded odd to Jack, distant and

confused. Jack swal owed, tasting vanil a and cinnamon when he did.

Renso pul ed the plane above the basin, trying to present Jack with as many

angles as possible.

‘The Spanish Conquistadors destroyed most of the temples and the holy

sites that were part of this landscape when they came to the Americas. They

stripped the surface of these mountains searching for gold and silver centuries

ago. See that dark line running through the centre of the plateau?’ Jack

nudged Renso’s shoulder and pointed up ahead. Renso nodded, pul ing the

Hornet higher, the line Jack was pointing to stretching out more clearly in front

of them. ‘That’s a vein of ore and that’s not something you’d normal y find at

the surface of a mountain. You’d find it under its surface.’

‘So these rings have been hidden until now,’ said Renso. ‘That’s what I

thought.’

‘I real y need to get into that basin, to get a closer—’ Jack’s throat

tightened. He choked out ‘look.’

‘Jack? Are you sure you’re al right?’ asked Renso, turning the Hornet

to

approach the basin from yet another angle.

‘Fine,’ croaked Jack, ignoring the lone voice in his head, his voice he was

sure, that kept saying, ‘No you’re not, Jack. Something real y bad is happening

to you.’

Jack shook his head to clear the solo voice that in a heartbeat became two

voices and then three and before Jack could shut them out, a chorus of voices

al sounding like his were taunting him about how bad he was feeling, how

awful flying was, how loud his heart was beating, how breathless he felt, and

how things were only going to get worse.

Worse, Jack – much, much worse.

Renso seemed to be oblivious to his passenger’s growing anguish and

panic. Jack forced himself to concentrate on what the pilot was saying.

‘Al I’m sayin’ is that if these rings had been visible for a while, I’d’ve noticed

them sooner because I’ve been flying this route at least once a month since

winter.’

The stabbing pain behind Jack’s eyes was worsening as the voices were

getting louder, and then they stopped, at least until Renso banked the plane

into another turn and came over the basin and the rings from the south. When

the Hornet swooped over the mountain once again, Jack could swear he was

hearing music deep inside his head. A thin violin melody. Jack leaned back in

his seat, and squeezed his eyes closed. The music was a lament of some

kind. It sounded familiar, he was sure of it, but he couldn't place where he'd

heard it before. And then the deep chords of the strings dropped behind a

voice, a woman's, melodic and rich, cut into the strings, harmonising with the

music. The sultry crooning was enthral ing.

When Jack glanced at Renso, the man was concentrating, silently, on the

Hornet's controls. The music and the woman's voice ascending together in

Jack's head, beautiful, heartbreakingly so. Jack's mother's image danced in

front of him. Squeezing his eyes closed against her memory, he could feel her

pain and her suffering in every bone of his body. When the Hornet swooped

across the plateau once again Jack felt enveloped in anguish for everything

he'd ever done. Hopelessness squeezed his throat closed. He was choking,

his breath labouring again. Then the music in his head swel ed to its

crescendo, its beauty washing over Jack in ribbons of blue directly

above

Renso's head.

With al his energy, Jack forced the music and the voices to the back of his

consciousness. Sweat dripped down his spine. He put his hand on Renso's

shoulder, squeezing, feeling some relief from the contact, the warmth of his

friend's body.

'One more turn, Jack?' Renso hoped he'd say no. His friend did not look at

al wel back there.

'Fine, Renso. Then I think I've seen enough for now.'

Renso took the Hornet up again, the wind whistled through the open cockpit.

With his binoculars, Jack scanned the horizon and thought he could see more

glyphs, drawings the size of footbal pitches etched out across the dusty

plateaus. One looked like a bird, the other a monkey, a candelabra. Renso

turned and the plane came back over the basin and the rings from the north

east.

Jack leaned over the side of the plane, staring into a clearing on the plateau

below, an oasis on the mountain, a pueblo vil age circled by huarango tress,

their roots like veins pulsing beneath the surface of the soil.

Jack watched as one by one the trees pul ed their roots from the ground

and began dragging themselves towards the mountain.

3

THE HORNET DIPPED, jolting Jack from his seat. When the plane evened out, Jack

looked down at the mountain's meseta. The oasis beneath him was lush and

edenic, the trees unmoving.

That was weird.

'Renso, when did you discover this was here?'

'Has to be right after the eruption in January. Right before Lent began,'

replied Renso. 'I do an occasional, um, favour, transport work, for the locals,'

he grinned back at Jack again. 'Keeps me in pisco and out of trouble. I think

I'd've noticed if these rings were inside the mountain before that.'

Jack forced himself to focus on Renso's words – the voices and the music

fading, but the pain in his head, the tightening in his chest, they were getting

worse. 'The volcanic eruption must have cracked the top off the mountain –

I've seen that happen before.'

Leaning back in his seat, Jack squeezed his eyes shut, hoping to push the

pain away while Renso forced the Hornet higher, banking into its final turn.

The beauty of the Andes, the southern tip of the Gran Tablazo de Icas,

spread beneath them like a canvas, the lush green lowlands, the highland

peaks drizzled with snow, the canyons like ribbons winding between them, the

plateaus dotted with sagebrush and the pyramids of sand lining the coastline.

The landscape reminded Jack of Boeshane, with its giant pyramids of rock

and mountainous sand dunes erupting from the ground like golden obelisks.

‘Do you feel that?’ asked Jack.

‘Feel what?’

‘The air? Suddenly it feels heavy. Oppressive. Shouldn’t be so dense this

high… and it tastes like—’

‘Tastes?’ Renso laughed and wagged his finger. He was real y worried now,

but replied lightly. ‘I suggest no more tequila for you tonight, amigo.’

Jack’s heart was racing, a bitter taste fil ing his mouth. And that smel ? Like

oil of vitriol… and fear.

His.

‘You realise this isn’t something we’re going to be able to keep to ourselves

for much longer,’ said Renso, flying the Hornet low enough for Jack to get one

more look. ‘Soon I’m not going to be the only one who owns a plane in this

part of the world.'

'I know,' Jack replied, rubbing his temples. Now he felt real y sick. This was

definitely much worse than a bad burrito.

'So what are you going to do about it?' Renso asked.

Jack's head weighed a ton on his neck, his eyes wouldn't stop watering, and

every nerve in his skin was on fire. Was he dreaming? Even his hair seemed to

hurt. 'I'l do… some… some investigating, Renso. I'l return when I know more.

,

'I don't know, amigo,' said Renso, glancing at Jack, holding his stare for a

beat. 'Perhaps this isn't a place you should ever return to.'

'Why not?'

'You look like shit.'

Jack forced a smile. 'Ah, thanks. It's the altitude or something I ate.'

'Ha, very funny, my friend. When has flying ever bothered you? I'm taking us

back to Castenado.'

'Good, but then I want a closer look, Renso. I need to get into that

mountain. I need to examine those rings.'

'Not on my watch, Jack.'

'Why not?'

'Cause, my friend, your eyes are bleeding.'

'What?' Jack wiped the back of his hand across his eyes, his tears pink

against his pale skin. Before he had time to process what was happening to

him, adrenalin shot up his spine, spiked across his limbs, and exploded into his

brain. Jack's back arched, his legs stiffened, and his entire body convulsed,

rocking the tiny biplane. He couldn't control his limbs, but he was aware of

every violent flailing movement. It was as if someone had wired an electric

current to his brain and was making his body dance.

' *¿Qué diablos?* ' yel ed Renso.

Horrified, Jack watched the words spew from Renso's mouth in waves of

green and yel ow, but the only sound Jack could hear was a woman's shril

pitch. And her voice tasted like ginger.

And then as if a switch was flipped inside Jack's brain, every sound around

him became painful y amplified – the howl of the wind, the roar of the

propel ers, even the scratching of his coat against his neck. And that stench.

What was that smel ? It was like trench mud and rotting corpses, mountains of

them, suffocating him. Jack gagged. He bit down on his tongue. His blood

tasted like… like death.

What the hel was happening to him?

Jack lifted his hand to his face, forgetting he was stil holding his notebook.

It flew from his fingers. Instinctively, Renso reached up to catch it.

‘Man, what the hel was that?’ Renso yelped, yanking his hand back. The

notebook swooped up into the air and out of reach. Renso screamed, and the

sound felt like a knife had plunged into Jack’s leg. He pressed his hand to his

thigh, but there was no wound. Slowly, he pul ed himself upright, the

convulsions final y abating.

Jack stared in horror at Renso’s right hand. His fingers looked as if a

hammer was crushing them one by one.

‘Oh Jesus, what’s happening? Do something, Jack!’

At first Jack was too stunned to move. Renso’s hand seemed to have a life

of its own, bone and cartilage pushing through Renso’s shredding skin.

Renso howled. Jack loosened his harness and at the same time Renso’s

wrist snapped in half, arterial blood spraying across the cockpit. Jack

scrambled from his seat. The Hornet plummeted towards the mountain.

‘ *¡Madre mía!* ’ Renso whimpered, his face draining of colour, his head lol ing

against the Hornet’s controls as he fought to keep the plane in the air with his

other hand.

‘Stay with me, Renso,’ Jack yel ed, ‘Stay with me.’

Jack tore his scarf from his neck, but when he tried to stabilise himself in

the cramped space the Hornet bucked and he was thrown back into

his seat.

Renso was bleeding out. No doubt in Jack's mind. He was watching his

friend bleed to death in front of his eyes. Jack climbed up on his seat, doubled

over because of the wing, and hooked his arm over the frame above him. He

stretched as far forward as he could in the tilting, tumbling plane, trying

desperately to get the scarf around the ragged bloody stump that moments

ago had been Renso's hand. The screaming in his head was getting louder,

the taste in his mouth sickening.

The Hornet lurched against Jack's shifting weight, his clumsy movements

wedging Renso tighter in the tiny cockpit. Renso's head knocked the throttle

forward as he fel into unconsciousness. The Hornet pitched into a spiral ing

dive, once again plunging towards the mountain.

The Hornet tossed Jack into the air like a rag dol . Windmil ing frantical y,

Jack lunged for the first thing he could, his fingers reaching, slipping then

grasping the edge of the wheelbase, his legs flying out behind him. The plane

shrieked towards the ground, the wind tearing into Jack's flesh as he hung by

his fingertips from the Hornet's side.

Jack hooked his arm over the wheelbase and swung his legs, hoping to

reach the cockpit. The Hornet flipped, trying to shake him off. Jack's body

slammed hard into the side of the plane, knocking the wind from him. Jack

gasped and lost his grip.

The screeching violins, the strident voices, the tragic laments of

hopelessness fel silent inside Jack's head.

With his coat bil owing out behind him like enormous wings, Jack plummeted

towards the face of la Madre Montâna, the plane spiral ing next to him.

'This,' thought Jack before losing consciousness, 'is real y gonna hurt.'

Isela

4

Southern Coast of Peru, Hacienda del Castenado, present day

ISELA WAS PREPARING to shoot someone. From her position on the north side of

the Hacienda del Castenado's chapel belfry, the 14-year-old had a clear view

of the Pacific to her left, the high desert tables of the Andes to her right, and

the narrow canyon through la Madre Montâna in front of her. She was hot and

bored and tired of always being the sniper in the tower.

In the 1640s, a Spanish Viceroy had erected Hacienda del Castenado to

enclose (and strangle) the ancient Inca vil age of Isela's ancestors, the Cuari.

The terraces of the hacienda were now a tourist gem carved into the west

face of the mountain. To solidify his power, the Spanish Viceroy, Alphonsa

Castenado the Great (or the Despised depending on the colour of your skin)

had constructed the chapel as the hacienda's focal point. It stood on the ruins

of a native temple that had lasted for thousands of years until it was torn down

by the Conquistadors.

Centuries later, Isela, a direct descendant of Alphonsa and his Cuari

concubine, lurked here, an automatic rifle resting at her side.

Isela's mother like most of the population of the surrounding vil ages was a

devoted fol ower of the region's religious cocktail of Catholic rituals and native

rites. She believed that the chapel's position on top of the ancient temple

meant the hacienda and al who lived within its pink-washed adobe wal s were

doubly blessed. As far as Isela was concerned, the place was continual y

serving a crushing blow to her dreams to say nothing of her spirit, which

Isela's mother and her *abuela*, her grandmother, insisted was the reincarnation

of a Cuari goddess.

Despite the strange dreams she'd been having al her life, and her uncanny

ability to see clearly in the dark, Isela wasn't sure she bought their

explanation, but tourists did and so she was forced to dress and act the part

during the Cuari Festival of the Goddess every Sunday afternoon at 4 p.m. in

the piazza. Not this week. This week the festival would have to find another

deity. Isela planned to be long gone by Sunday.

Isela swatted a fly from her face and spat grime onto the cobbled stone of

the belfry. She cursed her mother for the hundredth time that morning. If not

for her mother, Isela might have had a chance to escape this oppressive

existence before today. If not for her mother, Isela might have had a chance to

put her talents, and she had plenty beyond her skil s with a rifle, to more

legitimate uses. If not for her mother, Isela might have kil ed her stepbrother,

Antonio Castenado, years ago.

In the cobbled piazza in front of the chapel, Isela watched the local artisans

setting up their stal s round the shaded arched perimeter. Every morning these

men and women readied their wares for the influx of tourists arriving from Ica

and Lima and regions further north. A river of buses would stream one by one

through the narrow canyon, until the hacienda and the outlying area were

swarming with people.

Isela watched the men and women uncover their carts fil ed with shiny

glazed pots, wooden crosses with brown Jesuses etched on them, and bright

tapestries stitched with Inca designs, likely made in Mexico, Isela figured.

For a few seconds, Isela kept her eye on a couple of men and two women

she'd never seen before who were struggling to steady their carts on the

cobbled stones.

Isela picked up her rifle. She sighted at a cart layered with T-shirts stamped

with everything from the pop image of Che Guevara to the silhouetted outline

of Zorro. Tourists were such dicks, she thought.

Staring at those two men and women for a few beats, she guessed they

must have been running the carts for a family member, someone who'd been

taken il perhaps. Then Isela mouthed the sound of a shot, letting her

imagination invent the chaos she could cause in the piazza if she fired at them.

Al hel would break loose. She couldn't wait.

Despite the early hour, the businesses around the square bustled with life.

Each corner housed a bar or a café with barrels of the region's famous pisco

brandy sweating on stone slabs outside every establishment. Most of the

umbrel a tables were already occupied with the wealthy tourists staying at the

hacienda's luxury spa hotel, which sat at the opposite side of the colonial

piazza.

From her angle, Isela didn't have a clear view of the chapel's steps directly

beneath her, but she knew they'd be fil ing with Indian women wrapped in

multicoloured shawls with baskets balanced on their heads. She could, though,

see a group of four or five boys beginning a footbal game on the airstrip, a

dusty field with a prefabricated concrete shed built just outside the hacienda's

wal s. Two mangy l amas were munching sagebrush near the makeshift goal,

the boys' kicks erupting in clouds of dirt.

Before she set her gun down, Isela spotted two of the food vendors rol ing

their steaming carts to either side of the hotel's carved wooden gates.

Where had they come from?

Her father would not be happy with their position directly in front of his

expensive but incredibly garish entrance and that made Isela smile. Perhaps

the day held more promise than she'd first thought.

Lifting her binoculars, Isela scanned the canyon road running north to the

highway and beyond that to Lima. Paradise.

God, she couldn't wait to escape this place. She searched the far horizon,

noting the clear line where the brush of the desert became the lush green

rows of olive trees. To her left, the ocean swel ed in waves of cobalt blue, a

fishing trawler bouncing on the horizon.

She squinted against the sun, and then with a raised fist she signal ed down

to Antonio. Her stepbrother was slouching across a massive white limb of the

huarango tree, his cigarette smoke pluming through its broad canopy, his

spurred boots cutting into its thick bark.

Inside the wal s of the hacienda, the huarango tree dominated the apron of

the chapel, its roots creating a fault line that ran unevenly under the entire

church, some thought for fifty kilometres beyond the adobe wal s.

Isela's *abuela* used to tel her stories about how the tree gave life to the

region, its leaves absorbing the fog and the dew from the ocean drawing

water to the aquifer beneath them, its yel ow bean pods nourishing the

landscape and its canopy sheltering the goddess who lived far beneath it

deciding the fate of mankind.

According to the story, when the world came to an end the tree would

stretch its limbs, crack open the earth, and walk into the mountain.

Glancing over the wal of the belfry, Isela stared at Antonio and the tree.

Every story her *abuela* and her mother told about her ancestors involved the

tree and the mountain in some way, which was one of the reasons why, her

mother explained, the Inca terraced their dwel ings into the rock face of la

Madre Montâna so as not to disturb the tree's far-reaching roots and yet stil

be close enough to the mother of al things.

Antonio nudged his cowboy hat off his forehead and stretched across the

tree's limb. Four years her senior, Antonio was wel practised in the art of

machismo, his olive skin, slim muscular frame and the thick blond hair he had

inherited from his California surfer mother simply reinforced his beliefs about

the world and his place in it, including the notion that running this godforsaken

region was a right he had earned, instead of the fact that he was the spoiled

bastard son of a spoiled bastard son.

He caught a glimpse of Isela staring down at him from the belfry. He cocked

his finger at her. She raised her middle one at him.

¡Que huevón! What a dick.

Reaching into the pocket of her denim shorts, Isela pul ed out her

grandfather's journal, quickly turning to the pages where she had left

off the

night before. The journal was wrapped in a tattered square of cloth, its edges

folded neatly around the smal book. Unwrapping it, she prepared herself for

the rush of emotion she felt when she had first flipped through its pages, as if

the sensations that her grandfather was experiencing as he wrote in this

journal remained trapped in its pages. She hadn't told anyone that she had

found it, so she couldn't ask anyone for help deciphering its sketches and

notes, only one or two of which she recognised.

The drawings, the equations and the notes made no sense to her, but the

letters tucked into the tiny pocket in the back cover were something else

entirely. She had glanced at those only once, folding them back in their place,

embarrassed and confused by their content, undelivered love letters to a man.

The sounds of the market rose up to Isela in waves of colour, snippets of

conversations, snatches of melodies, animal cries, children's shouts, a truck

backfiring, al floating in her line of vision in ribbons of blues and yel ows. Then

a click. Click. Click. A series of chirping sounds from the piazza below.

She tasted sour milk.

Lifting her binoculars again, she turned to face the hotel bordering the

opposite side of the square. Its salmon-coloured wal s glowed in the morning

sun, its white shutters closed against the encroaching heat. The hacienda

might no longer be run from Spain, but it was stil a colony. Because history

has a sense of irony, the land was once again in the hands of a usurper – her

father, Asiro Castenado. He was her mother's second husband; the

bankruptcy and death of the first had meant the hotel would have to be sold.

Isela's father had married her mother just hours before the bank could close a

deal with a North American corporation. Isela's mother had welcomed the

purchase because it meant she'd never have to leave the mountain. Isela did

not want the same fate.

The wooden doors into the hacienda's tropical courtyard were slowly

opening, the hotel's armed security guards settling into their positions for the

arrival of today's influential mark. The guards were dressed in what her father

believed was authentic uniforms of the Spanish Conquistadors.

¡Que huevón!

The sooner she could escape this place the better.

Gaia

Southern Coast of Peru, 1930

‘EL CÓNDOR! EL Cóndor! ’ yel ed a child, sprinting down the steep canyon path

and into the vil age, sure-footed despite the loose rocks and dust she was

kicking up. ‘A man with enormous wings has fal en from the heavens.’

The tiny pueblo vil age sat near the flat top of la Madre Montâna in the

Sacred Val ey of the Andes, nestled against the cliffs on its highest plateau

and one of the holy places in the coastal plains that the Conquistadors had

failed to discover when they marched their armies across Peru. During Manco

Inca’s great final rebel ion, the Cuari had carried their belongings and their

secrets higher into the mountain to this sacred spot where they had survived,

secluded and protected, ever since.

For centuries, the Cuari had little contact with civilisation beyond the

immediate val ey. On occasion a dogged slave runner, an intrepid missionary,

or a curious university scholar had ventured unaware into their vil age. They

tended to leave just as quickly, never quite sure of what they’d seen or done

or discovered. The vil age gradual y became a myth, a Peruvian Shangri-La,

fragmented stories making their way back along the trail to Cuzco and Pisco

and Lima and beyond. Eventual y, any remaining curiosity about the hidden

secrets of this mysterious place faded in comparison to the al too tangible

draw of the stunning cairn temple ruins at Machu Picchu and the discoveries of

the nearby Nazca lines. As time passed, the stories about the vil age and the

whereabouts of the Cuari tribe became forgotten.

Now no one spoke of this sacred place, and the Cuari did al that they could

to keep it that way. When the time came, the universe would know of their

existence.

The Cuari's High Priestess and medicine woman ducked out from her hut.

Her skin was as pocked as the side of the mountain, her white hair knotted in

a thin braid, her layers of skirts revealing thick calves and bare feet. Most of

the vil age's younger women were crouching over a large fire pit, pounding

maize on huge flat stones and rol ing tortil as in their nimble fingers. One or

two of the women had sleeping babies wrapped tight to their backs. They

looked up as the girl skidded, breathless, to a stop in front of the Priestess.

'It's him,' the child exclaimed, bouncing with excitement. 'I saw him. He came

down with the flying machine.' The girl pointed to a funnel of thick

dark smoke

pluming to the heavens from the crashed Hornet.

‘Where are your animals?’ the High Priestess asked her. Together, they

crossed the clearing to a stone temple, a round cairn with a stepped roof

reaching a pyramid point, built before the conquest beneath the canopy of two

huarango trees. Their monstrous roots ran below the surface of the plateau

like giant claws holding the mountain in their grip. The Cuari believed that they

did.

‘Grazing with Rojas. She is capable.’ The girl’s voice dropped to a whisper

as they got closer to the round stone temple. She hated the goats, and she

wasn’t that fond of Rojas either. They both smel ed badly, which is why she

had wandered off to explore when she heard the mechanical bird flying

overhead. Her heart was thumping in her chest. ‘We should go quickly. I know

where he fel . The mountain didn’t take him yet.’

The Priestess frowned at the girl. ‘Did you touch him?’

‘No!’ she said, looking at the ground, scuffing her bare toes into the dirt,

ashamed that the Priestess would even think her capable of such dishonour.

The girl knew that she was not worthy of looking upon a deity, and so al she

had done was to gather up the belongings that had fal en from the sky and

scattered across the plateau, avoiding the smouldering flying machine as she

did. The giant bird frightened her, the noises of the wood snapping and

crackling in the flames like an angry night lion.

‘Good,’ the Priestess replied, tousling the girl’s curly black hair and

accepting the belongings that she had wrapped in her striped poncho. Behind

the Priestess, the heavy curtain of reeds covering the entrance to the sacred

cairn rustled.

The Priestess dropped to her knees. The girl fled.

Two hands wrapped in wide strips of red gauze reached out from behind the

screen, palms up. The Priestess hooked the poncho over the gauze, making

sure the fabric did not touch any skin. The poncho disappeared inside.

‘The time of the prophecies is at hand,’ said the High Priestess in the ancient

tongue of her ancestors. ‘I wil prepare myself to enter.’

‘I am ready,’ said a low, sultry female voice.

The Priestess was the Cuari’s *amautas*, the keeper of their historical

narrative, the protector of the tales of their ancestors, tales told and retold

from the times aeons before El Diablo Pizarro – from the time when the stars

had fal en into the mountain and the world was born.

The old matriarch had spoken to traders at the lowland vil ages, and to the

archaeologists who were now digging at a temple ruin on the other side of the

mountain. She knew from them that the gods were using men to wage battles

in the world beyond their vil age. But as always the Cuari had been spared the

encroaching violence because they had an ancient prophecy to fulfil and the

mountain to protect them.

Back inside her hut, the Priestess undressed, letting her skirts fal in a

bundle near the door. She stood in an iron tub and bathed, scrubbing her skin

until every sharp angle and soft sagging spot was rubbed raw. She let the

warm moist air in the hut dry her mottled skin before she unfolded a clean

grey tunic and pul ed it over her head. At her door, she slipped her feet into

leather sandals and stepped outside. A smal grouping of vil agers, who had

gathered in front of her hut when they heard the girl's yel ing, backed away

quickly to let the Priestess pass.

At the entrance to the temple, she stopped and knelt, making sure her knee

did not touch the ground.

'May the gods protect you, Gaia.'

Then she pul ed aside the heavy screen and stepped inside the temple

of

the Star Guide.

The Priestess careful y dropped the curtain behind her, aware of every

crackle and rustle as she did so. She remained in a smal outer chamber

whose wal s were draped in red and black embroidered fabrics, waiting until

Gaia adjusted to her presence and summoned her forward. When she did, the

Priestess lifted the final curtain of heavy draping on another arched entry and

stepped through into the main chamber of the temple.

In this chamber the sunlight was muted, its beams filtering through the slits

in the stone and diffusing across lush red fabric that dressed the wal s and

draped the ceiling. The ground was carpeted in alpaca skins, softened and

dyed to match the colour of the wal s. The colour red tasted like sweet

paprika to Gaia and, in her solitude, when she wil ed it, the colour brought her

contentment and a deep sensual pleasure.

A fire was burning in a centre pit, its basin-shaped lid fil ed with water, a

myriad of holes funnel ing the smoke up through the opening in the stepped

roof. Under the netting, almost every brick was covered with bril iantly

coloured glyphs, describing the story of the Cuari and the history of the

mountain.

A thick cushioned mat piled with embroidered blankets stood against the far

corner while a second mat of yel ow reeds had been unrol ed next to the fire,

a single row of decorated clay pots set at its head. The air in the hut was

dense, humid, but cool and scented with eucalyptus and balsam, the only oils

for which Gaia's senses had developed a tolerance.

Gaia stood at the other side of the chamber, naked, staring at the

Priestess, a look of such agony on her face it brought tears to the old

woman's eyes. Gaia's skin was the colour of cinnamon, her eyes shining like

black polished stones, her hair cascading over her shoulders like soft velvet.

She was tal and slender, her breasts and her hips already ful and round, and

every few seconds she bobbed up on her toes, inhaling and exhaling in sharp

short breaths, the intensity of the Priestess's presence an assault on Gaia's

senses no matter how wel the old woman had scrubbed.

When the pain eased and Gaia had managed the cacophony of sounds in

her head, she waived the Priestess further into the chamber, where she

stopped and dipped her hands into a pot warming on the fire. She cleansed

her hands one more time, a ritual the Priestess had been carrying out

every

day for over seventeen seasons, since Gaia had moved from her wet nurse to

the temple. After a few more minutes, Gaia would be able to tolerate the

Priestess standing almost at her side.

‘You wil need to climb the mountain,’ the Priestess whispered, her quiet

voice fil ing Gaia’s mouth with the taste of lemons. ‘In sunlight.’

‘I know,’ said Gaia. She had never ventured outside in daylight – her body

had no capacity to filter the light and the noises of the vil age. Some day, she

had prayed. And some day had come.

‘I’m prepared,’ she whispered. ‘I have been for ever.’

The Priestess nodded, glancing at a garment draped across a mahogany

trunk that resembled chainmail in its design and its weave, the kind of

protective garment the Conquistadors may have worn beneath their suits of

armour. With the help of three Cuari weavers, Gaia had fashioned her suit

from the softest cotton, layering the outside with black suede from animal

pelts, the stitching glimmering with silver threads.

The priestess picked up the garment and helped Gaia dress, careful y

slipping the suit over her head, lifting the young woman’s sleek hair over her

cowl, fastening the delicate silver claps on the breastplate, lacing the

supple

leather skins to her feet and legs. When the Priestess finished dressing Gaia,

she stepped back.

‘You are your night self,’ said the Priestess.

And she was. Gaia looked like a sleek black puma.

Isela

6

Southern Coast of Peru, minibus from Lima, present day

JUAN CORTEZ WAS a man of diverse talents, but only a few passions.

Unfortunately, he had fal en victim to one of his passions for the last time.

Cards, cockfights, footbal games, weather patterns, anything where he could

wager what little money his talents as a driver earned him, which wasn’t much.

That was why for the past three months he had been driving the route from

Lima to the Hacienda del Castenado four times a day.

Juan owed money to his bookie and that meant he owed money to Asiro

Castenado. He had no choice as to how his debts were to be paid off. Juan

was a quick study and he had learned the routine necessary for these special

runs, and so far he had not encountered any glitches. He was glad of the

work, especial y since his wife was expecting their third child. And this trip

would be his last one. He'd been promised his debts would be paid, his

freedom bought.

Juan glanced in his mirror, checking out the passengers behind him. This

group was smal er than most of these usual private charters, especial y one

with the day's mark on board. The two youngest passengers were asleep,

their bodies draped across each other – a man and woman in their mid-

twenties, probably university students, their backpacks stuffed into the

overhead bins.

A handsome middle-aged man who looked like an ex-rugby player sat alone

at the rear of the bus with headphones on and his computer open on his lap.

Of al the passengers, he looked the least like a tourist in his tan summer suit

and blue shirt open at the col ar. But his manner was relaxed, and Juan was

sure he would not be a threat when the time came.

Juan guessed this was a man who'd been on this trip before because he

was paying no heed to the spectacular sea views as the minibus climbed up

the mountain to the mesa. Perhaps, Juan figured, the man was a tour planner,

checking out arrangements for a future group.

Too bad the tour wasn't going to end the way his travel books

predicted.

A man and woman in their early thirties were each reading guides to the

Inca trails that Juan's brother-in-law had sold them at the terminal before they

boarded the bus. They seemed like an odd match. The man, who looked like

he'd never left the beaten path a day in his life, was dressed from head to toe

in hiking gear from an upscale outdoor catalogue; everything matched and

fitted perfectly. The woman had long dark hair, a face of freckles and the

palest white skin Juan had ever seen. She'd been sleeping on and off since

they boarded. They had different accents, although one was as thick as the

other's. Juan thought the man might have been from Louisiana. He'd been to

the casino once in New Orleans. The woman, he thought she might be Irish or

Scottish. He wasn't sure. Those accents sounded the same to him.

Sitting directly in front of the couple was the morning's mark, the one at the

centre of today's events, a middle-aged Brazilian male, trim and fit, the CEO

of an international liquor distribution company and a man with close ties to

power of al kinds. He was travel ing with his third wife, also Brazilian, athletic,

bronzed and beautiful y enhanced, and she, Juan knew, was fronting

the

morning's enterprise.

She caught Juan's gaze; he averted his eyes.

The last passenger Juan considered was the one sitting directly behind him,

a good-looking man, hard to peg his age, military grooming, dressed in desert

combat fatigues, the insignia of a United Nations security force stitched on his

shirt. Gazing out of the window, he was lost in his thoughts. He'd spoken to

Juan in Spanish when he'd boarded the minibus at the last minute, squeezing

through the closing doors as Juan was pul ing away, making it impossible for

Juan to insist he wait for the next one, which he should have.

A soldier in the mix was not something Juan was comfortable factoring in to

the careful y crafted plan. The soldier's grey eyes had a lot going on behind

them, Juan decided. He'd have to watch him closely when the time came.

Two hours south of Lima, the van turned off the Pan-American highway and

onto the narrower canyon road that began the climb to the Hacienda del

Castenado. The dramatic change in the landscape perked up the sleeping

passengers and the odd couple. The man in the back closed his laptop,

popping out his external drive and slipping it into his pocket.

Juan had only ever seen la Madre Montâna once from a plane, and when he

had he'd thought it looked like an upside down bowler hat that the gods had

carved out of the ground – the coastal road circumnavigating the narrow brim

of the mountain. Driving to the hacienda, cut into the rock halfway up the

mountain, was like driving in a trench. There was no space for error on either

side, which meant that once the minibus reached this part of the journey there

was no going back, no getting on or off until Juan came out the other side onto

the terraced landscape of the Gran Tablazo de Ica and the hacienda.

Once the van reached the canyon road, the surface evened out, widening a

little to accommodate the rows of terraced olive and grape vines on one side

and to provide a safe distance from the sea crashing beneath them on the

other. On this first leg of the climb, every Pacific wave sprayed water over the

van. The students laughed as if they were on a ride at Disneyland. The soldier

had closed his eyes, the businessman was reading and the Brazilian couple

was arguing. Let the poor sucker win this one, thought Juan, watching the

Brazilians in his mirror. It'l be his last.

Juan shifted his gears, compensating for the surface changes of the

now

unpaved road and the gradual incline as the minibus climbed even higher

above sea level. With these first few miles of the coastal road, he needed al

his concentration. He'd shift his attentions to the real job at hand once he and

his passengers were safely at the top.

7

AIMING HER BINOCULARS out across the landing strip, Isela tracked a plane coming

in low through the mountains. It was stil a speck, shifting in and out between

the snow-capped peaks. She turned her attention to the canyon road,

watching for the minibus that would soon be visible on the horizon. Then,

shifting herself out of the sun, she turned her binoculars to one of the guests

at the hotel who had been reading in the shade of an umbrel a at the café

since early morning.

According to one of the hotel's sous chefs, the man had simply appeared

the night before when the town was locked up tight against a raging Pacific

storm. The weird thing was, the man hadn't banged on any doors, hadn't

shouted for anyone to open up, had made no anxious cries for shelter. He'd

simply pul ed up his coat col ar and huddled against the front gates of

the

hacienda, the lashing rain and buffeting winds pelting him for hours.

According to her mother, this man was charismatic and charming and cursed

– she could smel it on him. That morning at breakfast, after her father had

excused himself to his study, her mother had insisted that the stranger smel ed

of death. Isela rol ed her eyes as she remembered her mother's admonition to

stay away from him.

'This stranger has the soul of *El Cóndor* , the ancient one fal en from the

heavens, unable to return,' said her mother in the tone of voice she reserved

for North American tourists and Isela. Her mother lifted a pewter goblet to her

ful red lips. ' *El Cóndor* carries darkness inside him. His burdens are pressing

on his soul. You must stay away or the darkness wil suffocate you.'

'How do you know this?' prodded Isela, wel aware that this conversation

was shifting into territory that forced her mother to remember her roots, to

have to say out loud that she was also Cuari, like her mother and her mother

before her, a line stretching back to the Sun King, one of the chosen tribe of

women meant to protect the mountain. With three marriages, and a

considerable amount of make-up, Isela's mother had managed to

conceal that

part of her identity. Until recently when the first tremors began and the

mountain got angry.

‘I am not stupid, Isela,’ said her mother. ‘I know how you think you can goad

me so easily, but mind my words. One day, you’l understand. Yes, I am a

Cuari, and so, my love, are you. So beware.’

Her mother lifted her goblet and moved to the tal arched window that

looked out over the family’s private gardens. Gazing up at the mountain’s

plateau, she shivered. Turning to face her daughter, she said, ‘I’d hoped the

burden of the mountain would never be yours to endure, but I’m afraid it may

be your destiny after al .’

Directly beneath them a fountain bubbled, its water drawn from an

underground spring that was part of an ancient aquifer that kept life in this high

desert. Dotted around the hacienda were similar fountains, each one

considered sacred, and, according to the stories reprinted in every brochure

and website for the hotel, had been flowing continuously since the area was

first populated in ancient times.

Next to the Inca trails that began a few kilometres from the hotel and the

nearby Nazca lines, the baths were a tourist draw. The water from the

sacred

val ey was believed to have properties that made men swoon and women

shiver; that made love sweeter and bodies more al uring.

Now, crouching alone behind the tower wal , her binoculars resting on the

crumbling surface, Isela final y spotted a cloud of dust on the far horizon.

At last. The mark.

The first bus of the day from Lima was coming off the highway and climbing

up onto the canyon pass, and this one was bringing her ticket out of this

stifling town.

Picking up her automatic rifle, Isela checked the cartridge, sighting it into the

shadows above the café.

The *cóndor* was staring up at the tower. Isela ducked out of sight.

¡Que huevón!

Gaia

8

Southern Coast of Peru, 1930

GAIA'S SENSITIVITY TO the world outside the temple had been further proof to the

Cuari that she was indeed their guide, their star scout, the sacred spirit

described in the ancient prophesies as the one to come before, the one who

would prepare the way for the deity when he returned to begin the end of

times. For the High Priestess, such affirmation had never been necessary. For

she had known that Gaia was a spirit guide since the night of her birth, which

she had witnessed: Gaia's first howl, her mother's last breath. Gaia had burst

from her mother's womb, limbs and tail first, encased in a thick membrane.

The Priestess, an old woman even at Gaia's birth, had become her guardian

and her teacher. From early in her childhood, Gaia could hear when the crops

should be harvested, could taste the wind before it blew, and feel the rains

from the sea before the clouds scudded the storms inland. Gaia felt pain when

she was not hurt, heard singing when it was silent, and at night she travel ed

beyond the mountain to the stars.

Gaia had learned divination from the rocks and the birds and even as a child

she had demonstrated her quick wit and her eidetic memory. The old Priestess

had taught her to read the ancient scrol s when she was barely able to walk to

fetch them. Gaia could hold the Cuari's stories in her head, glyph for glyph as

she read them, remembering the names of every child born in the vil age since

the conquest.

How many nights had the old woman bathed her in oils to quiet her spirit

when it raced across the heavens, her body convulsing against the ground, her

being so sensitive to the material world that her screams could wake the gods.

Perhaps they final y had.

For her part, Gaia knew her place in the Cuari was a special one, but she

also knew that her place in the cosmos would be even more acclaimed. Gaia

and the old Priestess had been watching the signs from the mountain since the

winds had sheared off its crown during the cold season.

If this man who had fal en from the heavens was the being prophesied since

ancient times, then the oracle had told the truth and Gaia must prepare to fulfil

her purpose. Gaia could barely control her excitement as she finished

dressing, sticking wax plugs into her ears, her excitement fil ing her head with

music.

The old woman placed her rough hands, the hands of a farmer as wel as a

holy woman, gently on Gaia’s shoulders. Even a priestess had to work to

sustain life in the tribe. No matter how sacred their purpose, they stil had to

eat.

‘The elders wil go with you to bring him back. Can you manage the climb?’

The Priestess looked at Gaia’s feet.

Gaia nodded, quickly braiding her hair and pul ing her cowl over her head,

leaving only her dark eyes and dimpled chin visible.

‘If this fal en man is the prophesied one,’ said the Priestess, ‘then he must

be sacrificed to the mountain as has been foretold, but, Gaia, if he is not…’

The Priestess did not finish voicing her doubts, fearing what it would do to

Gaia if this man was not the one from the prophesy. Gaia’s quick mind had no

space for uncertainty in this matter, no crevices for doubt. This was her

destiny. Her reason for existing. The Priestess sighed. Gaia may have been

born an ancient star guide, but in the old woman’s eyes she was stil a child.

‘Remember what you’ve learned. He must be examined on the mountain,

Gaia, and if he is not the one, you must do what you have been trained to do.

He must not return here with you. We must not be discovered until the

prophecy can be fulfil ed.’

The Priestess lifted down a long wooden case from a stone shelf. Her

knees popping as she bent to lift a sword that rested inside on red satin, its

silver hilt carved in the image of the puma with jade for its eyes and a col ar of

pure gold.

The Priestess eased the heavy sword into a leather sash fastened across

Gaia's chest. 'If he is not the one, his head must return to the mountain.'

Gaia nodded. 'But if it is him?'

'Then as it has been foretold, you wil assist his return to the stars.'

'And mine?' she asked, lifting her head, her eyes blazing, her hand resting

on the hilt of the sword.

'You wil be his guide,' the old woman replied.

9

A COPPER BELL forged at Chavin de Huantar had once hung over the entrance to

the temple. Its chime would have brought everyone immediately, its particular

pitch heard by a Cuari no matter where she was on the mountain. But when it

had last been rung, a decade earlier, its chimes had sent Gaia into a madness

that it had taken her months to recover from, and her sensitivity to the world

was increasing the further she crossed into womanhood.

Instead, the Priestess sent two girls scurrying to cal the rest of the Cuari

from the mountain above the vil age. The pair dashed up into the mountainside.

The women set down their tools, hitched up their l amas and al of them

processed down the lush green slopes, their chatter like birdsong in the wind.

The Cuari gathered quickly and quietly in front of the Priestess. Propped at

the old woman's feet was a lavishly embroidered pouch, concealing something

that was the shape and size of a head.

' *Mujeres de la montaña*,' said the Priestess, raising her arms to the sky,

speaking in the language of their Cuari ancestors. 'As the oracle has foretold,

the deity has made his escape from the heavens. We must prepare him for his

return to Uku Pacha so that time may be free.'

The Cuari glanced at each other, excitement in their eyes. A few whispered

among themselves, one or two nodded and looked to the heavens in silent

prayer. No one chanted or shouted or praised the heavens aloud. They were

far too close to the temple and to Gaia for any vocal demonstrations of their

faith.

'Gaia wil lead you to him,' said the Priestess, addressing four of the

strongest Cuari kneeling before. They were dressed in colourful tunics, with

the tribal symbol, three interlocking circles, raised to a point tattooed on the

backs of their necks. Their feet were bare, their hair neatly braided,

their

brown faces mapped with sun and suffering. ‘Remember that if he is indeed

the one from the stars, he must be returned here before nightfal , before the

heavens discover that he has gone.’

The Priestess lifted the heavy screen from the temple entrance and Gaia

stepped out into the sunlight, her cowl protecting her eyes from the dazzling

light. The entire vil age prostrated themselves in front of Gaia and the

Priestess. A few of the younger women who had been children when Gaia had

first gone into the temple had never seen her before, and they gasped at her

ethereal beauty, their voices tickling Gaia’s toes. She looked across to the

younger women and smiled broadly at them.

The Priestess motioned Gaia to step forward and hold out her wrapped

hands. She anointed each of Gaia’s fingertips with balsam oil in a blessing to

the mountain for Gaia’s safe passage before handing her the head-shaped

pouch, which Gaia accepted with a curt bow. Then, with the help of another

Cuari, Gaia slipped the pack over her shoulders with great care, balancing its

weight against the tilt of the sword in the sash across her chest. As a guide,

Gaia knew she and the Priestess were the only living beings who could

have

any direct contact with the deity from the heavens. With al her heart, Gaia

prayed he was the one – his presence among them, his return to them, would

al ow her to bring an end to her suffering without bringing dishonour to the

Cuari from the gods.

Before Gaia and the elders began their ascent to the mountain's flat top,

one of the vil age women passed Gaia a pouch fil ed with water, two warm

tortil as and a lump of goat's cheese. Knowing they would not be stopping until

they reached their destination, Gaia tore into the sparse meal as she led the

procession up into the canyon towards the bil owing smoke.

For anyone else the climb would have been a difficult one, but the Cuari had

spent their lives on this mountain and they were as agile in their movements

and as skil ed in their climbing as any mountain lion, especial y Gaia. She kept

a safe distance ahead of the elders so that their odours and the low hum of

their conversation caused her as little discomfort as possible.

When the narrow pass began to flatten out towards the plateau and a field

of ice was visible like glass on the horizon, the temperature dropped

drastical y. The cold chimed in Gaia's ears like distant goat bel s.

Despite the

wax plugs, Gaia could hear a long low moan of anguish in an outcropping of

rocks directly up ahead. Gaia tasted saltwater and her fingers tingled. She

knew they were close to him.

Gaia raised her hands and stopped the elders, pointing up ahead to the

sagebrush and the rocks where the man's mangled legs and twisted feet were

visible, twitching against the ground.

The Cuari stopped, not shocked at the sight of the shattered body and

broken limbs caught between the rocks – they had seen enough slaughtered

animals in their lives – but at the feral moaning that was emanating from the

man. It was terrifying. If this man came from their gods, one of the Cuari

elders thought, he was not happy about leaving.

Gaia was about to run forward when the same elder reached out and

grabbed her from behind. Gaia flinched as if she'd been struck with a whip.

The elder pul ed away her hands immediately. 'Forgive my touch,' she

whispered. 'But he may be dangerous.'

'He wil not be,' replied Gaia. Her own voice tasted like ginger root on her

tongue. Gaia was far too curious to see what the gods had sent to wait any

longer. The elders drew their swords and formed a horseshoe round the

rocks, making sure they could not look upon the man, but they could assist

their guide if she needed protection quickly. Gaia tiptoed closer to the body.

The mist had lifted from the mountain and the sun was at its peak, long

shadows poking like curious fingers between the rocks.

Gaia untied the pouch and set it on one of the larger flatter rocks, halting a

few paces from the soft brush where the man had landed. She stared down at

him and prayed he was the god who would be the mountain's salvation. And

her own.

He was broken in too many places for Gaia to count, his body lying at odd

angles, his arms dislocated from his shoulders, his head lol ing to one side on

a pil ow of blood. The back of his skul had flattened in the impact. His face

was so swol en that his eyes were slits sliced into his bal ooned skin. Teeth

had stabbed through his lips and they were stil oozing blood.

This is not the prophesied one, Gaia thought. This is a mortal man. She

turned to the elders. 'He is not the one the oracle foretold.'

Gaia leaned forward, and tilted the man's head back, exposing the torn skin

and ragged bone of his broken neck. Turning her body, she unsheathed her

sword, holding it steady at her side. Living a life cloistered from the world had

given Gaia al the time she needed to master most of her ancestors' fighting

skil s. She was as adept with her sword as any knight had been. The jade on

her hilt caught the sunlight, sending triangles of light bouncing off the rocks and

a melody of flutes in Gaia's mind.

The man moaned.

Gaia lifted her sword above her head.

In the seconds before Gaia brought down her blade, the man turned his

head and Gaia watched in astonishment as his neck healed and the back of

his skul fil ed out.

Letting her sword fal at her side, she dropped to her knees. Without

knowing why, the elders fol owed their guide's lead, and they too knelt.

'Forgive me,' she said to the man's swol en face, his lips repairing

themselves as she stared.

He howled again. With every smal tear that healed, every bloody wound

that dried up, some agonising, mind-blowing pain seemed to be shooting

through his brain.

Recognising his suffering, Gaia reached into the pack the Priestess had

given her. She slid out a gold mask like the helmet of a Conquistador, with a

faceplate shaped like the sun soldered to it.

He seemed to be aware of Gaia's movements and the soft melodic lilt of

her soothing voice, and his howls quieted. Crouching next to his head, Gaia

slipped two cacao leaves from her sword's pouch.

She looked up at the sun. They didn't have much time. The sun was already

making its descent to the underworld, and when it reached Uku Pacha the

gods would know this deity had escaped. They had to move quickly if they

were going to get him safely to the vil age before night and prepare him for the

mountain.

She gently opened his mouth wide enough for her to press the two leaves

on his swol en tongue. She poured water into her hands from her canteen then

trickled the cool liquid from her fingers into his mouth, lifting his head slightly so

he could swal ow. Dripping more water onto her wrapped hand, she mopped

his forehead and bathed his swol en eyelids. Then she rubbed soft wax across

his cracked lips. He moaned again, softly, less agitated this time.

Gaia thought he was trying to smile.

She stayed at his side until his anguished moaning ceased and the coca

leaves had calmed him. When he was silent, she was aware that his

legs had

healed themselves, bone no longer cutting through his torn trousers. Gaia lifted

the mask from the rock above him and eased the golden sun over his face.

Her task completed, she nodded to the elders that she was ready. The four

women spread the sling open next to his body and then careful y rol ed him

onto the sturdy skin. Gaia noticed that his arms were no longer dislocated.

The revelation that this man was able to heal his own body did not shock her.

He was after al from the heavens.

Lifting the poles onto their shoulders and with Gaia leading their descent,

the women raced the setting sun down the steep canyon pass to the vil age.

10

Langley, Virginia, present day

DARREN CROWDER HAD been a journalist before the Miracle, a good one. He'd

been working on the health desk of the *Washington Register* , an online

weekly read mostly by policy wonks and government agency bureaucrats. As

tragic as it had been, the Miracle had given Darren and his col eagues lots of 'I

told you so' opportunities as the events of those terrible months had exposed

flaws inherent in America and the world's healthcare policies. When

people

final y began to die again, two significant global changes occurred as a result:

governments increased the personnel in their clandestine agencies in the

hopes of avoiding another such event; and, within these agencies, they

covertly invested resources to track the three families who were behind the

near apocalypse.

Many months and far too many international tribunals and governmental

hearings later, the anger and horrors surrounding the Miracle had dissipated,

and blame had been spread evenly among governments, corporations, health

organisations and NGOs for the catastrophic administrative and leadership

failures that had led to such terrible lapses in global morality. Ordinary men

and women just wanted their lives to return to some kind of normal. Their

deaths, too.

Darren Crowder had been recruited for the Special Activities Division of the

CIA. The Deputy Director had read and appreciated Darren's work post-

Miracle Day, and had personal y hired Darren as an analyst. The new agency

was known publicly (and any time the Deputy Director was within earshot) as

the Office of Geo-Global Affairs; the rest of the time, it was known as ‘the

Morgue’, because their mandate was the result of death’s comeback.

Looking across the crowded room, Darren decided that, although this was a

branch of the CIA, the space had al the characteristics of a newsroom. Its

mandate was unique but its approach was no different – smart men and

women gathering information, raking through reports and records to uncover

patterns and relationships. In the case of the men and women in this particular

room, sifting to discover how deep the power of the three families ran,

whether or not they continued to pose a threat, and perhaps the most

important question of al , as far as Darren was concerned, who the hel were

they?

Darren’s computer beeped an alert. He typed in his access code and a

satel ite map popped up on his screen. At first he distrusted his own eyes. He

couldn’t possibly be seeing what he was seeing. Zooming in on the image, he

stared at the screen for a good ten minutes before saving the file to the

department’s server, logging off and dashing into the narrow hal . Skipping the

elevators, he took the stairs instead, leaping down three at a time.

Breathless, he rushed into the Deputy Director’s outer office. The Deputy

Director's assistant jumped up from his seat, attempting to block Darren's

entry into the inner sanctum.

'I need to see the Deputy Director immediately.'

'Let me see if he's available.'

The assistant sat back down, waving Darren to a leather couch where he

realised a young woman was sitting, flipping through a magazine, obviously

waiting to see the Deputy Director. She looked familiar, but he dismissed the

feeling, realising that everyone applying for a position with this unit had the

same look about them: grey suit, grey expression. No one had a sense of

humour any more. It was as if society had lost its ability to mock, to poke fun

at life, because death had left for a while.

The assistant hung up the phone. 'He's in the middle of important interviews,

Agent Crowder. I'm afraid you'l have to wait like everyone else.'

'This real y can't wait,' said Darren, pushing past the assistant, who couldn't

get to the emergency lock on the Deputy Director's door in time. Darren

charged into the office, but not before he noticed the woman on the couch was

stil flipping through her magazine, unfazed by his brash actions.

Inside the expansive office with its view of the capitol building, the Deputy

Director looked up, snarled, and with a wave of his hand dismissed a new

recruit who was seated in front of his desk. His assistant shut the door with

more emphasis than necessary.

‘You have to see this, sir,’ said Darren, placing his palm on the top-left

corner of a wal -mounted computer screen. After his access was granted,

Darren cal ed up the file that he’d viewed at his desk.

‘This better be something,’ said Rex Matheson, the agency’s most recently

appointed Deputy Director, stepping out from behind his desk and closer to

the screen.

‘It’s from the Castenado operation in progress in Peru, sir, the one tracking

our lead to the three families.’ Darren paused before adding, ‘And it’s way

more than something. It’s someone.’

Isela

11

Southern Coast of Peru, Hacienda del Castenado, present day

THROUGH HER BINOCULARS, Isela watched plumes of dust trail behind the minibus

as it climbed along the canyon road towards the hacienda. It would be close

enough for her in ten minutes, max.

She peered over the top of the tower wal , signal ing to Antonio who pushed

off from the tree, and jogged inside the wooden gates of the hotel's tropical

courtyard. A few minutes later, the speakers on the pink adobe wal that faced

the square emitted the lyrical strains of Andean charango music, the high-

pitched guitar sounds loud enough for even the footbal ers across the airstrip

to take note. The market came to life when the music filtered from the

hacienda. The vendors opened their stal s, the women on the church steps

haggling with each other for the best spaces.

Isela stared at the boys playing near the airstrip and realised that she could

no longer see the approaching plane. Had it landed and she'd missed it?

No, that wasn't possible. But if that wasn't possible, where had it landed?

The hangar, tucked into the trees next to the landing strip was where her

father kept his planes, and she could see that it was stil secured.

Focusing her binoculars on the tree line, Isela scanned the area at the start

of the hiking path that led deeper into the canyon and up to the mountain

plateau. Tourists usual y took the other road, the one to Lake Aczuma, a man-

made oasis that filtered the spring waters for the travel ers who came to the

hacienda for something more authentic than the hotel's swimming pool and the

guided tours of the nearby Inca ruins.

With the music blasting, the men and women dotted around the market

place were suddenly livelier, their movements choreographed in response to

the hotel's demands to entertain arriving tourists. Not that these vil agers didn't

benefit. The Hacienda del Castenado was the envy of many of the region's

bigger towns, with its community buildings, including a state of the art primary

school completely rebuilt after the devastation of the 2007 earthquake, a

disaster from which lots of vil ages in the area had never recovered.

But hotel or not, beneath the strains of the music and the colourful costumes

of those crowding the square, Isela knew these peasants were al stil slaves

to the owner of the hacienda, her father, the drug kingpin and kidnapper

extraordinaire, and her mother, the matriarch of the mountain.

Beyond the concrete structure, Isela focused on a cluster of round thatched

roof huts, brick cairns, built by her ancestors centuries ago for ritual sacrifices

to the gods for a rich crop. Her father had kept the outside structures intact,

but renovated their insides to create saunas and meditation huts for the New

Agers who would make their pilgrimages to the resort in the tourist months.

These cairns dotted the landscape, forming a line up into the mountains.

Forgetting about the plane, Isela zoomed her binoculars in on the last cairn

bordering her father's land.

Was that movement she could see behind the structure?

She held her gaze on the spot for a beat, reassuring herself that she had

imagined it.

The minibus was right on schedule, having passed the first cairn on the

canyon road, then the second, and was now close enough for Isela to see the

driver with her binoculars. She recognized Juan at the wheel.

Shit, why did it have to be Juan? She liked him. He was loyal, which meant

he would not give up the mark without a fight.

Eight minutes to go.

Isela turned her attention to the *cóndor* in the café, who was getting to his

feet. He threw some money on the table and jogged along the cobbled

sidewalk behind the café towards the airstrip and the boys playing footbal .

Isela narrowed her focus on the scene. The boys stopped playing, and

watched the man walk towards them.

He said a few words. They replied. From the hand gestures and the body

language, Isela knew that they were negotiating. It was a skil everyone in the

hacienda had perfected. The man passed money to Enrico, who Isela knew

was her age and the oldest of the group. Enrico handed the bal to the man

who tossed it in the air in front of his feet, booting it across the airstrip and

over the flat roof of the hangar.

Why would he buy a footbal from them only to kick it into the trees? The

boys sprinted after it, disappearing into the jungle behind the concrete hangar.

A piercing whistle broke Isela from her reverie. Peeking over the belfry wal

at the piazza, she saw Antonio signal ing to her to begin her countdown.

Isela nodded. Final y, she was going to get out of here. Get away from the

madness and the sway this mountain had on her.

Setting her rifle in a tiny trench she'd dug out of a stone on the ledge, she

sighted on the canyon road and waited her chance to be free of the mountain.

Gaia

12

Southern Peru, 1930

THE SUN WAS a blazing orange bal dipping into the sea as Gaia led the elders

down from the mountain. They were carrying the man between them.

A young girl had met the procession midway with water for Gaia and the

elders. Now she darted out ahead of them to alert the High Priestess. As soon

as she knew of the procession's proximity, the Priestess accepted a bouquet

of condor feathers from another elder. Soaking the feathers in a clay bowl

fil ed with goat's blood and with another elder pacing behind her holding the

pot, the Priestess marked the wal s of the temple. It was a necessary part of

the ritual so that when the underworld discovered the man from the heavens

was missing, the temple would be protected from the wrath of the gods.

Every three steps, the Priestess stopped, prayed, and then brushed the

Cuari symbol of the three interlocking circles on the stone blocks of the

temple. While she marked, her chants cal ed on the gods of the three worlds –

the underworld, Uku Pacha, the overworld, Hanan Pacha, and the world of

man, Hurin Pacha – to join as one as they once had been. The three must be

united when the prophecy was fulfil ed.

Gaia halted at the end of the canyon, letting the Priestess finish her ritual.

When she had walked the perimeter of the temple, the Priestess placed the

feathers into the bowl and then waved for Gaia to proceed. The twilight made

it possible for Gaia to drop her hood as she crossed the dusty clearing,

her

shining eyes absorbing as much as she could withstand before hiding herself

away to prepare herself and the *cóndor* for their journey. As soon as Gaia

walked out of the canyon, the vil agers dropped to their knees, prostrating

themselves on the ground, pul ing their smal children beneath their bodies,

terrified of seeing the man who had fal en from the heavens.

With Gaia stil leading the way, the four elders carried the sling through the

channel created by the vil agers and set it down inside the circle the Priestess

had made. Only the Priestess and Gaia were permitted to cross the circle.

Leaving the man wrapped in the sling, the Priestess and Gaia each gripped

a wooden pole and awkwardly dragged his inert body into the temple. They

stopped next to the reed mat Gaia had rol ed out earlier.

'I am sorry,' said the Priestess, breathless from the task. Gaia waited until

the old woman had caught her breath and mopped her forehead dry. Gaia

tasted potatoes from the old woman's sweat.

Lifting a rol of black cotton gauze from a basket next to the door, Gaia

wrapped the thin fabric round her head, covering her mouth and nose. She

looked like a *bandito*.

‘We must fol ow the prophesy as precisely as we can,’ said the Priestess.

Gaia nodded, swal owing the high sharp chords shooting across her skul

and the aching in her joints from the odours of blood and sweat emanating

from the man. She had become skil ed at carrying her suffering because she

knew it was a gift from the gods. This day would fulfil her destiny. Soon she’d

be dancing on the stars.

Placing a bowl intricately patterned with bands of red and black next to the

man’s head, the Priestess knelt and untied the leather straps binding the sling.

She glanced up at Gaia, who nodded, and then with a graceful flourish the

Priestess threw open the sling.

The old woman fel back on her heels, knocking over two of the clay pots,

their oils absorbed instantly into the soft wool rugs carpeting the temple floor.

The man’s clothing was torn and bloodstained, but his bones were no longer

broken, and the mass of tears and cuts to his legs and arms were almost

healed. Gaia lifted the golden mask from his face, and both women looked at

each other in astonishment, tears of awe fil ing Gaia’s eyes.

The man’s face remained bruised, his eyes swol en, his lips cracked, but his

face had no other injuries.

‘Have you ever seen anything like this… like this *being* in your experience,

Gaia?’

‘Never,’ said Gaia, kneeling at the other side of the man, stroking the dark

hair away from his forehead.

Both women remained at his side, sitting cross-legged in silence until the

sun fel completely from the heavens and dropped into the sea, and beams of

moonlight filtered into the hut through the slits in the stones. The fire had long

since gone out. When moonlight touched the top of his head, the Priestess

slowly rose to her feet, her bones creaking. Gaia remained seated, her eyes

closed, drifting in and out of sleep.

The Priestess relit the fire, then touched Gaia’s shoulder. ‘It is time. Uku

Pacha has opened. We must prepare for your descent.’

For al of her young life, Gaia had been practising and praying for this

honour, to be the one to guide the star man to the underworld so that the

ancient prophesy might be fulfil ed. Since the beginning of time, the Cuari had

been the protectors of the mountain, first waiting for a guide to be born among

them and then, when she was waiting, preparing her to accompany the deity.

Gaia accepted a bowl of warm milk from the Priestess, drinking al of it

without even noticing the dots of colour that danced before her eyes as she

did. Returning the empty bowl to the Priestess, Gaia slipped her ceremonial

hunting knife from its sheath. With trembling hands, she began the ritual that

until this day she had only dreamed about.

First, Gaia sliced the blade through the sleeves of the man's coat, peeling

back the cloth, exposing his shirt, braces and trousers. While the priestess

removed his boots, Gaia stripped off his bloody clothes, tossing them into a

pile near the temple door. The Cuari elders would take the clothes up to the

mountain where they would burn them, sending the smoke into the mountain

as a sign that he was coming. When he was naked, Gaia soaked a piece of

cotton in warm eucalyptus oil, bathing his face and his body.

Gaia had never seen a naked man until now, but the images on the wal s of

the temple and the glyphs on the ancient scrol s had prepared her for the

sight. When she finished, she spread a blanket she had spent most of her

childhood embroidering with a sleek black puma circling a giant condor. She

spread the blanket across the man's naked body.

The Priestess crouched behind Jack's head and painted the Cuari symbol on

each of his temples using inks from the row of clay pots, while Gaia washed

the man's feet.

Soon the air in the hut was thick and pungent, the aromas from the oils and

the steam from the water basin clouding the space. The man moaned and

stirred under the blanket.

The Priestess looked at Gaia. 'The time has come.'

13

JACK HARKNESS OPENED his eyes. He sat bolt upright and inhaled. He was not

breathing.

Dead. Again.

He had experienced this awakening too many times before. He knew what

to expect.

He inhaled. He exhaled.

Nothing.

No gasping. Nothing.

Cupping his palm at his mouth, he exhaled again. Nothing. He wasn't

breathing. What the hel ?

Renso. The Hornet. The mountain. Jack's chest felt light. He pressed his

hand on his heart. Stil beating. So maybe not dead.

In limbo? Stil healing?

Strange.

Jack took deep breaths in and out, but nothing went in or wheezed out from

his lungs.

So did that make him dead?

Confusion rushed over Jack in a cold wave. Never experienced this before.

And then the wisp of an image – a girl, the sun, a kiss, darkness.

And so much pain. Jack gasped, the memory flitting away.

Sitting up, Jack could feel he was lying on a platform of rock. He squinted,

running his hands over the surface, eventual y seeing he was on a lip of rock

that ran the circumference of a massive stone chamber. The wal s were black

granite marbled with veins of silver that were pulsing in the darkness. Above

him the chamber formed a square opening, a faint glimmer of moonlight

filtering down. Far below him the ground rippled like a satin robe in a soft

breeze.

Could rock do that?

Jack was acutely aware of his body, of the fact that he was wearing nothing

except a long, intricately embroidered tunic, that the soft wool was caressing

his skin, that he was enjoying the sensation immensely, that he was hearing

water flowing somewhere in the distance, that despite the darkness he was

now seeing clearly, and that in the face of an overwhelming thirst he was

tasting lemon and ginger and a hint of chocolate.

Had he fal en from the plane to this place? Into the mountain itself? The

plane exploding on the ground flashed in front of Jack, Renso's last moment

like a black and white newsreel running above Jack's head. He reached out a

hand to touch him. The image dissolved. Renso. Poor Renso.

Jack heard himself think the words, but he felt no sadness, no ache in his

loins or his heart. He adored Renso, had adored Renso, and yet Jack couldn't

make himself feel even a fleeting moment of grief.

Staring down at his hands, Jack turned them over and over. Long fingers, no

cal uses, flat round nails. Definitely his hands. Then he pushed up the wide

sleeves of the tunic and stared at his arms. He parted the tunic, running his

hands across his skin. No puncture wounds, no damage anywhere on his

body.

So he had healed from the fal .

But did he fal ? When did he fal ? Minutes or months ago? The memory of it

felt smal and thin and kept darting from him.

‘I’m Jack Harkness,’ he said aloud, his voice carried no echo. In a stone

chamber of this size, it should have. Strange.

‘I’m a Time Agent, a time travel er.’ Jack smiled. His voice felt soft and

sensuous in his throat. ‘I know a Time Lord, the time of the day, the time of

the night, tea time, two times two is not too many times,’ he said, laughing, the

words bouncing playful y in his brain.

His laughter echoed, but his voice had not. He laughed again. The silver

veins in the wal s pulsed brighter each time he did. Jack had never seen

anything like this place, and he had been strapped into and locked down in a

lot of strange places. This had to be one of the most fantastic.

Leaning back against the rock wal , Jack felt a warm rush of desire flood his

being. He felt himself grow hard beneath the tunic. Wow. His body felt

ethereal, weightless, but grounded, experiencing this moment, substantial. The

silver veins from the rock, reached out like long probing fingers and they

danced across his body.

Jack closed his eyes, but instead of darkness he saw himself languishing on

the platform of rock experiencing a powerful rush of pleasure.

For a beat Jack realised the chamber was inside his head and outside

it.

Behind him and in front of him. He laughed at the absurdity and let himself sink

back into the rock. The silver veins threaded themselves across every muscle,

every limb, every part of him. Closing his eyes again, he could see himself

being folded into the rock.

The sensation was wonderful, yet Jack heard himself thinking that this was

not a good wonderful. It was a bad wonderful. It was the wonderful at the end

of a thril ing journey. It was the wonderful after intimacy. It was the last hurrah,

the final chapter, the kiss goodbye, the beginning of the end.

Jack lifted his arm and tore it away from the wal , snapping the threads.

He heard a sob. It tasted like ginger.

Maybe this was a good thing after al . He let his arm fal to his side again.

The threads slithered over his hand instantly. Jack's body had never felt so

warm, so whol y satisfied, so welcomed, so at peace.

'Jack, move!'

Closing his eyes again, he saw himself closing his eyes again, and closing

his eyes again, and closing his eyes, his mind in a fun-house mirror of its own

making. He spoke out loud, he yel ed, he howled, the sound of his own voice

keeping him aware, forcing him to be aware that he was not ready for the

end.

He was inexplicably conscious and unconscious at the same time. Self-

aware, trapped in a chamber, somewhere underground, and more than a little

freaked out.

'The time of the prophesies is at hand.'

Jack glanced up. Not his voice. The opening in the top of the chamber was

widening. Jack could see the ful moon. Jack liked the moon. He smiled at the

thought, the veins pulsing as they tightened their grip on his legs, his thighs, his

cock, thousands of them now like thin threads of electricity pushing and

probing through his hair, pouring out of the black rock, engulfing Jack,

absorbing him. Suddenly the veins were wrapping his body, mummifying him,

swarming and slithering, engulfing Jack's shoulders, his neck, his head.

A low growl, seductive, echoed in the chamber. Jack licked his lips. He

tasted mint. His hands tingled. Jack's head was almost ful y covered in silver

threads, and he could see in front of himself, behind himself. The universe

floating around him. He was in the stars. He was home.

'Hey! Hey! Are you OK?'

‘Wait,’ shouted Jack. He felt hands pul ing his head and shoulders from the

soft rock. ‘I’m not ready.’ They were his hands.

Jack watched the silver veins retreating, screaming, into the granite.

Looking down, Jack could see a school of blue fish with bulging marble eyes

and spiny scales gliding in and out of his line of sight.

The growls were louder, less seductive, angry and feral.

Jack stared at the fish, mesmerised, a memory from his childhood playing

out before him like a hologram inches from his eyes. Jack was a teenager,

running into the Boeshane Sea with his brother, Gray, trying to catch blue

anchoa. An almost impossible feat, but if you caught one when its eyes were

open then you could see your future.

Had we caught one that day? Am I stil a boy and this is my future?

Jack looked down. The fish were gone, and Gray, and their past too.

The growling became a word, ‘ *Fall!* ’

The word pulsed from the veins shooting like electricity from the granite

again, attaching to Jack’s head. A thunderous roar erupted from beneath him.

‘ *Come on, Jack. We’ve got no time left.* ’

The roaring was getting louder and as it did the taste in Jack’s mouth was

intensifying, ginger and lemon and eucalyptus.

‘ *Fall!* ’

Jack stood and took a step towards the precipice, staring down at the three

rings of fire, al circling in unison, chasing each other, the end of one the

beginning of the other.

‘ *You must fall together* ,’ howled the voice, animalistic, deep, and not

human. Like Jack was hearing an electrical charge, a sound wave, a force of

nature.

The veins throbbed brighter and pul ed tighter around Jack, even as he

stood on the edge.

‘No!’

Jack tore himself from his cocoon and when he did the entire chamber

began to crumble around him. Jack threw himself across the ledge as a

massive rock crashed down from the wal behind him. Jack rol ed from its

path, but as soon as he did, the rock raised itself up on the ledge. Shifting its

shape into a petrified version of Jack, it lunged at him.

Jack locked his fingers together into a double fist and swung at the

monster’s head. The rock crumbled in front of him, sending pieces of

smouldering rock and ash into the abyss below.

Jack felt as if his skul was cracking. He stared at his hands, wil ing them to

move again. He ripped the rest of the silver vines from his head, his

chest, his

arms, and his legs. The mountain screamed, the rock rumbled, a thunderous

roar burst from the rings of fire, sending a flaming serpentine fissure up from

below. The fissure shot along the lip, chasing Jack across the ledge. The

chamber shook. Jack skidded, scrambling for a foothold. Hot bubbling lava

began rising from the rings beneath him.

‘ *Fall!* ’

‘No!’

The keening shriek whistled angrily from every crevice. ‘ *This is how it must*

be.’

14

JACK’S EYES FLEW open.

‘Jesus, amigo,’ said Renso, tossing a bloodied rock down into the dark

abyss of the mountain. ‘How the hel did you get al the way down here?’

Jack stared blankly at Renso. He felt as if he’d been in a bar brawl and he

had not won. Every muscle ached, his head hurt and he smel ed of sex. A

heavy gold blanket was draped across his waist. He kicked it away and

stared, stunned, at a beautiful dark-skinned young woman curled next to him.

Jack shook her. She was unconscious, a cut on her forehead bleeding

onto

Jack's tunic.

Confused, Jack looked up at Renso. 'Where am I?'

'You're on some kind of altar,' said Renso, helping Jack sit up. 'Like a grotto

that's been carved into the inside of the mountain. There are three of them al

round the perimeter down here. I think that's what we were seeing from the

Hornet jutting out from the inside the mountain's basin.'

'The what?'

'My plane, which, by the way, is nothing but melted rubber and tinder now.

You owe me so badly, amigo.'

Jack wobbled to his knees. He felt Renso shaking him. Panic and

bewilderment crashed Jack's psyche. Renso wasn't touching him.

The ground was shaking.

He was shaking.

'Easy does it, my friend.' With two good hands, Renso grabbed Jack's arm.

'It's a long way down.'

'When am I?'

'What?' asked Renso, not understanding Jack's question.

'Time?' stuttered Jack. 'When is this?'

'Wel after midnight of the day we went flying, if that's what you mean. I've

been searching for you for hours.' Renso handed Jack a canteen. Jack gulped

and gulped until water was dripping down his chin.

‘My chute caught in the trees so I was out for a while too. But, Jesus, how

on earth did you get down here?’

Renso peered inside the grotto. The wal s were covered in rows of colourful

glyphs and drawings. Renso waved his flashlight over one of them. It was a

detailed drawing of a man riding across the stars on the back of what Renso

thought looked like a mountain lion, a puma to be precise. Renso tilted the light

up to a series of interlocking pointed circles carved across the grotto’s arch.

‘What is this place?’

‘Renso? Is that you?’ Jack grinned, as he final y grasped who was with him.

‘Renso, I’m so glad to see you. I thought you went down with your plane.’ Jack

lifted his hand, caressing his friend’s rough beard.

‘I’m happy to see you too, Jack, and I did go down with my plane, only not

al the way to the ground, thank God.’ Jack handed him back the canteen. ‘But

we need to move, Jack. We’ve not got much time.’

‘Time for what?’ Jack stood up, instantly feeling dazed, confused and

nauseated again. What the hel was he wearing? He held up the sleeves of an

embroidered tunic, the wool itching his skin. His legs were covered in

scratches, long sharp claw-like scratches, blood was dripping from a cut on

his arm, and al the way from his ankles to his groin his skin was covered in

thin red lines, like rope burns.

Renso helped Jack to his feet, guiding him along a ledge towards the

shortest section of the rock that he had climbed down.

Jack looked up. They were about ten metres inside the mountain.

Without warning, a thunderous rumbling shook the entire basin. Jack pitched

forward. Renso grabbed him and pinned him against the wal until the tremor

settled.

‘This volcano is about to blow again, Jack. I don’t know how you got down

here or what you were doing with that… that animal over there, that’s none of

my business,’ Renso pointed back to the grotto at what was curled beneath

the blanket with Jack.

‘We’ve got to get out of here. Now!’

Suddenly a geyser of black steam exploded up through the mountain, firing

chunks of flaming rock out through the top, pelting Jack and Renso as they

shuffled towards their way up. Renso half-carried, half-dragged Jack to where

he’d left his rope. The air was thick with tar and sulphur.

‘Renso, we should dance and then we should have a drink and then…

who

knows.' Jack chuckled, grabbing and shaking his friend's hand.

'My friend, I don't know much about what happened during these last few

hours, but one thing I do know. You, Jack Harkness, are stoned.'

'I thought you died, Renso,' exclaimed Jack. 'I'm so glad you didn't.'

'No thanks to you,' said Renso, wrapping his rope round Jack's waist and

tying it off in two thick knots. 'You were a man possessed this morning. Eyes

bleeding, weird sounds coming from your mouth and then you attacked me.

You leapt over into the cockpit and you tried to snap my wrist, ended up

tearing the hel out of my skin.' Renso held up his wrist, showing Jack three

raw patches where his skin had been scratched away. 'Then you knocked me

out.' Renso tested that the rope around Jack's waist was secure. 'Next thing I

know, you're flying through the sky like a bloody big bird and my Hornet is

about to meet the mountain.'

Jack grabbed Renso's shoulders, pul ed him forward and tried to kiss him.

Renso slapped him upside the head. 'Jack, no time. I'm going up to the top

and then I'l pul you out.'

'I can climb. I'm a seasoned climber. I once raced Hilary to a summit… now

where was that? Wasn't Everest, I know that.'

'You're in no condition to climb without my help. Stay here.' Renso pushed

Jack against the wal .

'Just for a few more minutes. OK? I'l get you out of here soon.'

'Okee dokee, my fine fine friend,' Jack giggled.

Winding the extra rope over his shoulder, Renso began to climb the rock.

In the grotto, Gaia stirred.

Jack watched, mesmerised, as the beautiful young Indian woman shook off

the blanket, stretched her naked body and began walking along the ledge

towards him. Her movements were graceful, her smile inviting. Jack could

taste ginger. He could smel her pleasure. She lifted her arms enticing Jack

into an embrace. In the thin beam of moonlight, her eyes shone like cobalt.

Jack could feel his loins ache for her. He took another step.

'Jack, stop! Snap out of it, Jack!'

Jack looked up. Renso was standing at the precipice, paying out the rope.

Behind him, Jack heard a low feral growl. Without looking back, he tugged on

the rope.

Jack was yanked off the ledge. For a second, he was swinging loosely over

the precipice.

‘Jack,’ yel ed Renso. ‘A little help would be good.’

Grabbing the rope, Jack used the momentum to climb.

Then he looked back and saw the Indian woman, her arms outstretched, her

dark eyes pleading with him to return. Jack hesitated. The rope released a

little. Jack slipped back towards the ledge.

In that instant, Gaia whipped her sword from behind her back and swung it

at Jack’s neck.

‘You must not leave!’

15

RENSO HAD FOUND enough crevices in the rock face to move with speed and

efficiency, which was good, because the air inside the mountain was heavy

with ash, and the stink of sulphur made his eyes water.

When he was almost at the top, Renso looked back down. Jesus, no.

Jack had moved. Behind him, the creature was slinking along the ledge, and

Jack was walking to meet it, his hand outstretched. It was a mountain lion, a

sleek black puma, animals that used to be everywhere in the Andes and were

now extinct in this region. The beast had a pulpy cut above its eye where

Resnos had thumped it, which was stil bleeding into the surrounding rock.

Renso dug his foot into a crevice near the top and hauled himself up

and

out, rol ing quickly away from the opening, unwinding the rope as fast as he

could. The moon was ful and the plateau was bathed in its soft white light.

Scrambling to his feet, Renso ran to an outcropping of rocks, tied off his end

of the rope, then sprinted back, wrapping two loops around his own waist.

Bracing himself above the basin, Renso slung the rope down and cal ed to

Jack. The puma was poised to leap. Renso knew that it would take Jack with

it down into the volcano.

‘Jack, stop! Snap out of it, Jack!’

He felt Jack’s tug on the rope.

He saw the mountain lion pounce.

He hauled on the rope. For a second, Jack was swinging against the

precipice, the puma snarling and snapping at his bare feet.

‘Jack,’ yel ed Renso. ‘A little help would be good.’

Thank God. Jack was climbing. Renso relaxed.

A sudden tug on the rope, and Renso knew that Jack had fal en back. He

heard the roar of the puma.

Renso pul ed his pistol, firing into the darkness.

‘Jack! Are you OK?’

Jack was staring down at the creature lying on the ledge, her shoulder

bleeding. ‘You shot her. She was so beautiful.’

‘You’re hal ucinating, Jack. You’re stoned. What I shot was not a woman. It

was a mountain lion. Now move before the damn thing gets up again and

wants to eat you.’

Minutes later Renso pul ed Jack out of the basin. ‘We need to get back to

civilization and fast.’

Jack stared back down at the body, a deep despair washing over him. If he

was hal ucinating, why did this al feel so real, and why did he feel that he

should remain here with her?

After Jack’s slow clumsy climb, Renso hauled him from the maw of the

mountain. By this time, the ground was trembling so violently, the smoke and

sulphur so strong, that even Renso was having a difficult time remaining on his

feet as he pushed and cajoled an unsteady Jack towards the steep canyon

pass.

About halfway down, Renso spotted a clearing and a deserted pueblo

vil age. ‘At least whoever lived here got out safely.’

A stone temple, shaped like a round pyramid, had been built in the centre of

the clearing. If the mountain was stil standing when this eruption stopped,

Renso decided, he’d come back. Might be Inca treasures stil buried in this

place.

Jack stopped outside the cairn. ‘I think I was here.’

‘How’s that possible?’

Jack pressed his body against an irregular block of stone that was

obstructing the entrance to the temple. It wouldn’t budge. He began to laugh.

‘Hey, a little help.’

‘No time, Jack. We need to get off this mountain before she erupts.’

Jack kept pushing, the stone moving a few inches then sliding back.

Renso kept going until he realised Jack wasn’t behind him. Renso was

starting to get angry. He loved Jack. They’d known each other since the Great

War. Jack had saved his life. Twice. And he was certainly the best shag he’d

ever had, but right now, stoned or not, he was a real pain in the ass.

Renso got behind Jack and pushed. The block of stone shifted enough for

their passage. On shaky legs, Jack stepped through the antechamber and into

the main temple.

‘I’ve definitely been here.’ Jack could feel it, but he couldn’t get the memory

of it to form.

Fol owing Jack inside, Renso was astonished to see that the chamber was

furnished as if a queen had lived here not centuries ago, but today. The fire

was stil smouldering.

Another deep throaty rumble from inside the mountain shook the chamber,

knocking both men off their feet. Jack fel into a stack of pil ows in the corner.

He didn't try to get up.

'I remember an old woman with white hair, and…' Jack's voice drifted off as

he tried to find words to get back what he couldn't remember.

The ground rumbled again, this time freeing two large triangular stones

loose from the roof, crashing them onto a wooden trunk, cracking its lid open,

exposing an array of ceremonial knives. Renso picked one up, admiring the

jade inlaid along its hilt. No point in leaving al of this to be raided by poachers

before the vil agers return, he thought. Plus some evidence might encourage

investors to sponsor a return trip. He slipped two of the gem-encrusted knives

under his belt.

Jack rubbed the heel of his hands against his bloodshot eyes. 'Man, I'm

fried. I can't get my brain to focus on anything for more than a second.'

Renso stepped to the fire pit, kicking over some clay pots as he did. He

lifted one, and shoved that into his pocket.

The mountain roared. The ground trembled. A fissure shot across the stone

wal s.

‘Why are we here, Jack? This morning I survived a plane crash. I real y

would rather not be buried alive in the middle of the night. I need a shot of

tequila and sleep. Make that a lot of tequila.’

‘And I,’ said Jack, getting up off the pil ows with some difficulty, bowing

slightly, holding the edges of his tunic, laughing. ‘I want some trousers.’

After a few minutes of digging in the baskets and wooden trunks around the

chamber, Jack found his coat in shreds under a mat next to the fire. He held

up one of its sleeves.

‘Looks like someone took a sword to your coat.’

‘Thank God I’ve got more than one,’ said Jack.

A deep rumble knocked both men to the ground, the smel of sulphur getting

worse, smoke and ash drifting in through the opening in the roof.

Jack scavenged around his shredded clothes, finding none of them in one

piece. His boots, on the other hand, were wearable. He sat down next to the

hissing fire and pul ed them on.

When he stood, even Renso couldn’t contain his laughter. ‘You look like

you’ve escaped from a sanatorium.’

Jack looked down at his boots, at the deep scratches, like claw marks

on

his legs from the Indian woman and a strange feeling of déjà vu came over

him, snagging part of his mind and focusing it. With an urgency that he couldn't

explain to Renso, he knew he had to remember the feeling, remember what

had happened today, if it had happened today. The mountain, the woman, the

old woman, the sun in his eyes, the cave… Already the memory was peeling

off, drifting away like ash.

He had to write down what he could remember. It was important. He didn't

know why, but he could feel in his bones that it was.

As the mountain shook, Jack rifled through remains of his coat, feeling some

sadness at its destruction.

'What are you doing?'

'I need to find something to write on before I lose what happened

completely. This mountain is doing weird things to my brain.'

'Maybe not just the mountain,' said Renso, lifting a bowl layered with cacao

leaves.

'I know that's part of it, but I feel different, like I'm watching myself think.'

'Here,' said Renso, pul ing Jack's notebook from his breast pocket, handing

it to Jack. 'Use this.'

‘How did you get my notebook?’

‘I found it when I was looking for you – after the Hornet crashed.’

Jack opened to a blank page, scribbled across the pages, not sure what he

was writing but feeling an intense need to put his thoughts on the page, to

capture al the weirdness that was flitting across his mind. Jack made notes

about the two women, about this chamber, the crashing of the Hornet and the

strange seduction inside the mountain. He wrote while al around him was

crumbling because at that moment, in that place, Jack believed he had lost al

sense of what was real and what was not.

16

AN EARTH-SHAKING CRACK shook shards of rock from the stepped roof of the

temple, pelting both men. Renso grabbed the notebook from Jack’s hands,

shoved it into his shirt pocket and, yanking Jack’s arm, dragged him out of the

temple.

Above the terraced fields, the two men watched as the top blew off the

mountain in an explosion of noxious gas, smoke and flaming rock.

‘Jesus, did you see that?’ asked Renso, pushing Jack ahead of him out into

the clearing.

‘I wonder what happened to al the other women who were here earlier?’

Jack asked, while they were zigzagging across the clearing, their hands

covering their heads as the mountain spewed pieces of itself at them.

A tree whipped from the ground near them, its massive roots tearing from

the ground in front of Renso, catching his feet and sending him splaying across

the dirt. As Jack scrambled to help Renso, they watched in awe as the ground

beneath the temple swel ed up as if air was being pumped underneath it. A

mound of earth lifted the structure higher and higher. The ground roared, then

the mound ruptured, swal owing the entire stone structure into the earth.

‘Jesus,’ said Jack, pul ing Renso to his feet as they made for the canyon

pass at the other side of the clearing, their only way to reach the bottom of

the mountain.

Renso could hear Jack laughing a few steps behind him.

‘What’s so bloody funny?’

‘That.’ Jack pointed to the smoking basin where the temple had been. A

fissure as wide as a trench was pushing out from the swal owed temple and

reaching along the ground towards them. Breathless, Jack watched the fissure

circle the pueblo vil age shaking it to its foundations, the adobe huts, the

nearby olive trees, the fire pits folding into the ground. And then it shot directly

towards Jack and Renso.

‘That… that fissure is chasing us,’ said Jack.

‘Jack, you are certifiable,’ said Renso, breathless and sceptical.

Leaping over trees being torn from their moorings, ducking from rock

projectiles flying off the temple, the two men charged across the clearing to

the jungle. Al around them what was left of the vil age was fil ing quickly with

the smoke and fumes from the volcano that was oozing lava.

‘I think the mountain is trying to stop us,’ shouted Jack, knocking Renso out

of the way of a fal ing tree.

Gagging from the smel and the smoke, the widening maw chasing closer

and closer, Renso yel ed back at Jack, ‘I think it may succeed.’

Every hut and tree the fissure snaked beneath was sucked into it, chewed

up, and then dragged along, crushed and crumbled in its wake. Jack’s lungs

were aching, his bare legs tattooed with cuts and burns from the flying ash

and hot coals spewing from the mountain. He knew that they had to get to the

canyon through the jungle but he was afraid that it was going to be impossible

to navigate in the fading moonlight.

With no idea where they were heading, side by side Jack and Renso

crashed into the thick jungle, ducking, dodging, weaving through the thick

foliage as it slapped and slugged and assaulted them.

Jack paused to get his bearings. Wiping blood from a cut above his eye, the

fault line crashed into the jungle behind them, its progress marked in the

crushed and col apsing trees as if an invisible monster was stepping on them.

Renso stopped and stood at Jack's side, the fissure charging closer and

closer.

Jack smiled at Renso, grabbing his face and kissing him hard on the lips.

'It's been a pleasure in so many ways, amigo. Now run. I know this sounds

crazy, and I know I'm stoned out of my mind, but I think the mountain only

wants me.'

'But… I'm not going to leave you to die. Not when I just found you again.'

'Trust me. I'm not going to die. Now run. Run!

Renso looked into Jack's blue eyes and saw something that made him

realise he'd never real y known this man. But even back in the trenches, he'd

been able to trust Jack's word. Renso turned and he ran, knowing in his heart

it was the last time he would ever see Jack Harkness.

Jack watched until Renso was out of his sight, then he took one, two, three

steps towards the oncoming rift. With only inches before the gaping chasm

touched Jack's boots, the ground stopped shaking, the cleft in the jungle

began to close, the ground healing itself, leaving a path of destruction that

looked like nothing more than a heavy wind had been trailing behind them.

Puzzled, Jack fol owed the line of destruction back to the vil age. He looked

up at the top of the mountain, calm now, no longer erupting, a thin sliver of the

sun rising behind it, capping its peak, washing it in the pale light of dawn.

Jack's headache was no longer raging. He sat down on a pile of loose mud

bricks that had once been someone's hut. He stared at his tunic, at his scuffed

boots, at his legs that were already healing. He glanced at the shel of a

pueblo vil age, at the terraced fields behind it that had been churned into

mulch, and he started to laugh. He ran his fingers through his hair and he

howled.

'Where the hel am I?'

17

Langley, Virginia, present day

'HOLD MY CALLS,' Rex Matheson yel ed into his intercom. 'And get

rid of my next

interviews.'

He glared at Darren. 'How did this mission become such a goddamn cluster

fuck?'

The computer screen in front of them was displaying a satel ite image of the

piazza at Hacienda del Castenado an hour earlier.

'Everything was going according to plan until—'

Darren used the track pad and zoomed the video image in on the belfry and

Isela taking her shot. Darren forwarded the image and they watched the

minibus careening off the canyon wal , flipping over, a body flying through its

windshield, then the van skidding to a halt at the mouth of the canyon.

'As far as I can figure, the girl must have been in on it with Castenado, but I

think Carlisle dismissed her as a threat because of her age. We had eyes on

everyone else in the piazza. Just not her in the belfry.'

'What happened to Agent Carlisle? He was driving the minibus, right?'

'He was, but he never gets out. I think we have to assume the worst, sir.'

'Shit,' Rex rubbed his hand over his shaved head. 'So what happened to our

mark, to Donoso?'

Darren used the remote to forward the satel ite. 'We don't know yet,

but it

gets worse, sir.’

‘How could it get any damn worse?’ yel ed Rex, pacing in front of the

screen.

‘Watch.’

Part Two

‘The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heav’n of hell,

a hell of heav’n.’

John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

Gwen

18

Swansea, Wales, two weeks before Isela’s shot

GWEN COOPER SPOTTED the madwoman waving her hands in the air shouting,

‘Distaw! Distaw!’ in the tea and coffee aisle. Glancing at the woman, Gwen

immediately dismissed her as a ‘nutter’ and returned to her struggles, getting

Anwen to sit in the front of the shopping trol ey. The madwoman eventual y

wandered over to the breads and cakes, her shouts of ‘Quiet! Quiet!’ echoing

in the warehouse-sized supermarket.

‘No! No! Uppie,’ Anwen demanded, grabbing a handful of Gwen’s hair when

she leaned forward to hook the safety strap round her daughter’s tiny waist.

‘Not this time,’ said Gwen, untangling her contrary toddler’s sticky hands

from her hair. ‘We’ve got a lot of shopping to do.’ Gwen manoeuvred her

trol ey towards the fruit and vegetables.

Anwen was not giving up this battle quite so easily. She began to

scream,

arching her back, stiffening her body and at the same time slamming her arms

and feet against the side of the trol ey.

Gwen pressed her hands on her daughter's scissoring legs in a pathetic

attempt to squelch the tide of the coming tantrum. It never ceased to amaze

Gwen how quickly this beautiful baby girl could morph into a monster child.

'Please, not now, Anwen,' Gwen pleaded. 'We've got to get back home

before Daddy does or I'l be in big trouble. Again.'

Anwen continued to thrash and scream, cal ing attention to the two of them

from the queue at the meat counter. In the middle of the afternoon, Swansea's

shoppers were not sympathetic to the squal s of a spoiled toddler. They

snarled and tutted. Gwen swore under her breath.

'Bugger off,' parroted Anwen.

Gwen gawked at her daughter. 'No. Bad word, Anwen.'

Great, now she's learning to swear, thought Gwen. One more thing to add

to her list of bad mummy traits. When did she start such a list? Gwen couldn't

remember and because she couldn't remember she was annoyed with herself

for even holding such a sentiment. She was a good mum. She was home al

day with Anwen. She was getting more quality time with her daughter

than any

of her working-outside-the-home friends with their suits and their shiny, styled

flat-ironed hair. Gwen couldn't recal if she'd even showered today.

Get a grip, girl.

Gwen guided the trol ey towards the cereal aisle. 'How about some puffs?'

'Puffs!' squealed Anwen, the tantrum stopped in its tracks.

Gwen laughed. Bribery as a child-rearing strategy. It worked every time.

'Maybe you'l only need a couple of extra hours of therapy,' said Gwen,

kissing the top of her daughter's head. She took out her phone and touched

the photo icon, passing it to Anwen, who tapped the screen knowingly, flipping

through the family photos.

Turning into the cereal aisle, Gwen wondered if the fact that Anwen could

already use a touch pad successful y was another sign of her flawed

parenting. What next? She'd be on the internet, sexting. Seriously, Gwen, get

a grip. And then she spotted the madwoman again. This time pacing directly in

front of her.

The woman was halfway down the breakfast aisle, tearing open boxes of

cereal, holding them up to her ears, shaking them aggressively, and then

dumping them onto the ground at her feet. Surrounded by piles of

cereal, she

looked like she was building a nest.

Definitely need a clean-up in aisle six, thought Gwen, pushing Anwen

towards the mess. Surprised, Gwen noted that the woman did not look

homeless or destitute in any way. She was dressed in dark jeans, a white

blouse and a navy suit jacket. Her purse hooked over her shoulder, a designer

brand, was covered in crumbs of Weetabix. The woman was muttering to

herself and every few seconds she'd stomp her feet and yel 'Stop it!' to some

imaginary person behind her. Somewhere along the way, the woman had lost

her shoes.

Gwen wheeled her trol ey closer and noted that the woman was not much

older than she was, in her early forties perhaps, and she felt a pang of guilt

for earlier dismissing the woman as some elderly nutter.

The woman spotted Gwen. 'Can you hear it?' she asked. Her lips were pale

and her mascara was smudged. She'd been rubbing her eyes – a lot. Her

neck was covered in red blotches and she'd lost one of her hoop earrings.

'You al right, luv?' asked Gwen.

'Do I look like I'm al right? I can't get a minute's peace today!' the woman

yel ed, tearing the top off another box, shoving her hand inside and pul ing out

a sleeve of cereal. ‘I can hear something moving inside these boxes. The

manager needs to know about it. Someone should tel him.’ The woman’s

voice cracked and she began to sob hysterical y.

Gwen picked up a box and held it to her ear, feigning interest and hoping it

might calm the woman. The woman stared expectantly at Gwen, who smiled

reassuringly. White specs of saliva were gathering at the corner of the

woman’s lips. Gwen held the cereal box up to her other ear to reinforce her

concern in the woman’s plight, while gently sliding her phone from Anwen’s

hands.

Anwen immediately began to howl in protest.

Startled, the woman dropped the cereal box she’d been examining and

began bouncing on the souls of her bare feet. ‘Make her stop! Make her stop!

It’s hurting my toes.’

Gwen tried to reach for the woman, to calm her, but she leapt away. Now

Anwen was squirming in the seat, her cries getting louder. An elderly couple

began down the aisle towards them, observed the scene and backed away.

‘Cowards,’ said Gwen, snatching a box of puffed wheat from the shelf, and

thrusting it into Anwen's hands. Immediately, Anwen's howls dropped to a low

fuss while she negotiated the top of the box, her tiny hands tearing into the

cardboard.

When Gwen turned back, the woman had dropped to her knees on the tiled

floor and was rocking back and forth, mumbling nonsense about her feet.

Gwen crouched in front of her. 'Is there someone I can cal for you?'

'I just want it al to stop.' She cradled her head in her hands. 'Everything is

too loud. Everything. I can hear myself blink. My feet ache. They hurt so

much.'

Poor thing probably stopped taking her prescriptions, Gwen thought, putting

her hand on the woman's shoulder and gently squeezing. The woman

screamed and crab-walked frantical y away from Gwen's touch.

'Don't yel at me!'

'I'm sorry… I'm sorry,' said Gwen, raising her hands in the air. The woman

backed herself against the corner of the shelves at the end of the aisle,

tucked her head between her knees and tugged her jacket up over her head.

'Listen, I'm cal ing someone for you,' said Gwen, cereal crunching under her

feet. 'I'l wait here with you until they come. OK?'

The woman let out a long sad moan. Gwen took the sound for a yes

and put

her phone to her ear, quickly cal ing 999. While she patiently explained the

situation, Anwen steadily covered herself in a rain of cereal.

Meanwhile the woman was thumping her feet against the shelves behind

her, but she was no longer shouting or even moaning, she was humming, not a

tune as much as a chord of peculiar-sounding notes that slowly became a low

chant in Welsh of ‘Distaw! Distaw!’

‘Thanks,’ Gwen said and slipped her mobile into her pocket. She knelt in

front of the woman. ‘It’l be ok, luv, someone’s coming to help you. I’m sure

they’l make the noises stop.’

19

THE SHOP MANAGER and a security guard charged down the cereal aisle, taking

in the piles of crushed grains, the empty boxes scattered on the floor, a

toddler in a trol ey eating from a ripped-open box like some kind of wild

animal, and two women crouched on the floor, one of them hidden under a

jacket, singing and rocking on the bal s of her feet.

‘Oi! What are you doing?’ the manager yel ed, pointing angrily at Anwen.

Blissful y unaware of her surroundings, she dug into her puffed oats. ‘Christ,

you'l have to pay for this mess you know. This isn't a… a play school,' he

blustered, nodding to the security guard, who pushed Gwen's trol ey off to the

side, blocking her passage back down the aisle to the front of the shop.

At both ends of the aisle, smal crowd of shoppers were gathering, some

taking pictures of the bizarre scene with their mobiles.

Gwen tried to squelch the rage she could feel rising in her chest as she

stood and faced the manager. She clenched and unclenched her fists, banging

them against her legs, taking deep breaths and hearing Rhys's voice in her

head before he left for work that morning.

'Please don't pick any more fights, Gwen. We already can't go to Boots or

to the butcher's and you're getting a bit of a rep at the Cwm Deri bakery, and

it's not for your taste in muffins. Try to stay calm. Please. Keep Mrs Angry in

check.'

Gwen forced Rhys out of her head. 'Mrs Angry'. Who the hel did he think he

was talking to? Anwen? I'm in control. I'm always in control. She could feel her

chest tightening and she could hear the manager speaking into his mobile and

for a brief moment she thought she could see his words, pink and opaque,

floating across her field of vision then exploding into a test card of white noise.

Real y, Gwen, get a grip.

She started to count to ten. Rhys was right. This was the closest

supermarket to home. Gwen was aware that her temper had been riding close

to the surface for a few weeks now. Since the terrible final days with Jack,

she'd been seeing red a lot, but, shit, this poor woman was so obviously il and

that big tool of a bloke had just wheeled Anwen – her daughter, and at the rate

she and Rhys were drifting apart it may be her only daughter, ever – without

her permission, and here she was only trying to help, trying to be a good

citizen, a helpful neighbour. No one appreciated her efforts at anything any

more. This woman needed her help. She did. And when was the last time

anyone had needed her help for something important? Hel , when was the last

time she'd done anything meaningful other than play with wooden blocks and

watch bloody CBeebies al bloody day.

'The police are on their way.' The manager pushed passed Gwen and

reached for the cowering woman's arm.

And that was al it took. Gwen grabbed his wrist and twisted his arm up

behind him, flipping him to his knees and banging his head against

the shelves.

‘I know they’re on the way. I frickin’ cal ed them!’ Gwen was swimming in red.

‘And this mess isn’t mine, you bloody idiot. It’s hers.’

Gwen’s sudden violent reaction, stunned the security guard who froze in

place for a beat, then came to his senses enough to wrestle his boss from

Gwen’s grip, pushing Gwen closer to the woman, who was rocking and

mumbling more aggressively on the floor.

The guard had completed his training only two days before, and he had

learned that you do not touch a customer unless you absolutely have to. Did

this count as one of those times? He stared at Gwen. This woman looked

real y pissed off. He looked to his manager for some guidance, but his boss

had backed up against the shelves, trying to regain some of his dignity, and

holding his mobile in front of him like a weapon.

‘I’m filming you,’ he yel ed at Gwen, ‘so… so you’d better back away.’

Gwen ripped the phone from his hands and dropkicked it into the dairy

section. Then she pivoted and faced the guard, who instinctively raised his

hands in surrender, taking two steps back.

Behind the guard, Gwen could see customers’ arms stretched in the air and

mobiles flashing pictures. Beyond the crowd outside in the parking lot she

could see the lights of an ambulance and a panda car, but worst of al she

could see a look of sheer terror on Anwen's face. God, what am I doing?

Gwen inhaled and exhaled and the red at the edges of her vision began to

fade, the crunch of the cereal at her feet softened, the lights above her

seemed to flicker and dim.

Holding her hand out to the manager, she said, 'I am so, so sorry. I… I

felt… I thought you were going to hurt her. This woman needs help.'

The manager slapped Gwen's hand away.

'And so do you, missus.'

Anwen started to cry again.

'Sorry. I'm so sorry. I don't know what came over me,' Gwen said, lowering

her voice and her hand. 'I was just protecting the woman. She's obviously

having some kind of seizure and you just didn't seem to care.'

Gwen could feel the anger churning in her stomach. She felt sick.

Ennobled by the sight of the police entering the shop, the manager puffed

out his chest and poked Gwen's shoulder. 'I want you arrested.'

'Mummee!' screamed Anwen. 'Uppie!' Then Anwen threw the box of puffs at

the guard's head, who turned and took a step towards her.

'Don't you bloody dare,' shouted Gwen, her blood boiling again. She

slammed her chest into the guard, who fel against the trol ey, causing Anwen

to scream even more.

‘I want you out of my shop this minute,’ hissed the manager, pushing the

guard towards the entrance. ‘Go get the police!’

‘Fine… that’s fine,’ said Gwen, catching her breath and unclipping Anwen

from the trol ey. ‘Please, let’s at least take care of this woman first. She real y

is in bad shape.’

The security guard turned and glared at Gwen while negotiating his way

through the crowd of shoppers to the front doors.

While keeping an eye on Gwen standing behind him with Anwen in her arms,

the manager crouched a safe distance in front of the madwoman, who was

now howling in anguish and trembling violently, her head wrapped and hidden

under her jacket.

‘I think she’s having some kind of epileptic fit,’ said the manager.

‘No shit, Sherlock,’ snapped Gwen.

‘Listen, you… bitch,’ said the manager, final y losing it. He stood up, pointing

at Gwen. ‘You’re a bloody menace and for al I know you did something to this

woman and that’s why she’s in such a state.’

A bal of white, like the after-burn of a camera flash, burst in front of

Gwen's eyes. She was about to charge the manager again, but Anwen

squirmed in her arms. Gwen blinked hard and the anger settled back in her

chest.

The madwoman's howls had shifted to screams of terror, jolting the

manager and Gwen from their face-off.

'Is that blood?' asked the manager, noticing a smal puddle forming under

the madwoman.

Two paramedics wheeled a gurney piled with bags of equipment down the

cereal aisle, forcing the manager and Gwen to step aside. The manager took

the opportunity to get clear of this insane mother. He marched down the aisle

to greet the two constables who'd arrived with the ambulance.

'Don't you dare move!' he yel ed back at Gwen. 'You're not leaving here until

I say so.'

'Piss off,' muttered Gwen, sliding Anwen onto her hip, watching with concern

as the paramedics tried to get a blood pressure cuff on the madwoman who

was now prostrate on the floor, breathing heavily, her body stiff as a board,

blood pooling under her head, which along with her hands was stil wrapped in

her jacket.

'Did she ingest anything?' the female medic asked Gwen while her

partner

tried to untangle the jacket from the woman's head. She slapped away his

hands, struggling against his ministrations.

'I don't know who she is,' said Gwen, tightening her hold on Anwen, aware

of the manager waving his arms while one of the constables stared at her and

the other unclipped his radio from his lapel, requesting back-up. This day was

not going to end wel .

'She was already real y agitated when I spotted her,' Gwen told the medic.

'I think she came into the shop that way.'

The medic was cutting the jacket from around the woman's head, her long

hair matted to the fabric with her own blood.

Gwen shivered, her anger becoming a dul ache in her limbs, the nausea

dissipating. Oh God, if they could track the madwoman's movements through

the store then they could track hers and she did not need to give Rhys one

more reason to be disappointed in her ability to lead a normal life. She was

already on thin ice in that area. No, make that cracking ice.

Final y, the medics had the madwoman restrained enough to peel the jacket

off her. Her hair was plastered to her scalp. Sweat soaked the woman's face.

And blood. Lots of it. The woman squinted, confusion and pain masking her

face. She held something up to the medic.

‘It’s al quiet now,’ she said.

The medic fel back on his heels, frantical y fumbling in his kit bag for an ice

pack.

‘Cal it in,’ he screamed to his partner, who couldn’t stop staring at the side

of the woman’s head, at the pink pulpy flesh above her neck and the bloody

ear gripped in her soaked fist.

The medic looked up to tel Gwen she’d better give the police her statement,

but Gwen and Anwen were gone.

20

CRADLING A MUG of hot cocoa in her hands, Gwen stared out of the nursery

window at the ful moon. Behind her, Anwen was asleep, final y, and Rhys,

final y, had headed to the local, for ‘some sanity’, he’d yel ed.

Gwen had edited her role in the events of the day considerably, saying only

what supported the brief mention of ‘The Madwoman in the Supermarket’ on

the local news. Rhys claimed he was sick of her self-deprecating taunts about

her domestic capabilities – had she real y told him she thought she was a bad

wife? Her complaints were exhausting him, he claimed. He refused to be

dragged into another fight with her over why she was so unhappy, why she felt

so useless and why she'd had this terrible taste in her mouth ever since she'd

come home from the shops. She had told him it tasted like hopelessness,

which, he hol ered, was as ridiculous as she was becoming. Slamming the

kitchen door, he stomped off down the road.

Gwen closed her eyes, trying desperately to let the silence calm her. How

did she get to this place? To this point in her life where she had no idea who

she was or what she was meant to do next? For a while, she had *been*

someone – a member of a team, a formidable force, protecting the world from

so many of the terrible things she hoped her daughter would never have to

witness, and, oh she loved her daughter more than life itself. Why then was

she so miserable, why was she so angry al the time and so, so terribly sad?

She sipped her cocoa, wiping the tears from her face. Hopelessness, that's

what it tasted like.

Maybe she just needed some company. Gwen watched the thin clouds cut

across the face of the moon.

‘“The tide is ful ,”’ she whispered. ‘“The moon lies fair upon the straits”… and

I’m going right off my rocker,’ she said aloud to herself, ‘reciting a bloody

poem I memorised at school.’

Behind her, Anwen rol ed onto her side, kicking off her blankets, snuffling the

way toddlers do, until she slipped back into sleep again. Gwen knew what her

mum thought was wrong – the baby blues, post-partum depression. But Gwen

knew that wasn’t it.

PTD, more like. Post-Torchwood Depression.

Maybe she should talk to someone about what was happening to her? After

today’s outburst in the supermarket, she was sure that she needed some

professional help, needed to find someone she could trust to help her make

sense of her mixed-up feelings, to help her figure out the next steps in her life.

She set her mug on the wide sil of the bay window and curled her legs

under her.

Where are you, Jack? I real y need you. Something terrible is happening to

me.

21

GWEN WASN’T SURE how long she sat at the window, watching the rising moon,

but it was long enough for her self-pity to begin to piss her off too. She

needed to take control of the situation. She stood up, knocking her mug to the

floor, a decision made.

She tiptoed out of Anwen's room and into her bedroom, lifting the baby

monitor from Rhys's bedside table and turning the volume to high. Anwen's

breathing was steady and clear. Downstairs, she grabbed her phone from the

table in the hal way where she'd set it on top of today's post, and a torch from

under the sink. Grabbing her coat from behind the kitchen door, she dropped

her phone into her pocket, keeping the baby monitor in her hand. When she

got to the front door, she held the monitor to her ear to be sure she could stil

hear Anwen. She could.

Gwen hurried along the street, putting the monitor to her ear every few

steps just to be sure. At the end of the road, she took a right turn, heading for

a row of lock-ups and opening one of the garage doors. Satisfied that Anwen

was stil asleep and that she could stil hear her, Gwen took a set of car keys

from her pocket and clicked the fob. Directly in front of her in the darkness,

something beeped and flashed twice. Gwen lifted up the bottom of a

camouflage tarp and popped up the rear doors of a large black vehicle.

Leaving the rear doors open, the tarp draped over them, Gwen climbed

inside the burned-out shel of the only surviving Torchwood vehicle. The back

of the SUV was empty. The seats destroyed long ago, the smel of charred

rubber, gunpowder and pizza of al things lingering inside. For a brief moment,

Gwen was sitting in the back as the SUV sped through the streets of Cardiff,

Jack driving, laughing, his hand resting lightly on Ianto's knee. Ianto serious as

ever. Tosh and Owen taunting him from the back seats.

Anwen's soft cries from the monitor brought her back to the SUV and the

shel it real y was. Gwen waited to be sure Anwen settled back to sleep.

When she did, Gwen crawled to the front of the vehicle, pul ing up a thick

plastic liner, swinging it al the way to the rear doors.

She pressed the key fob in a series of three beeps, a pause, and then

another two, watching as a compartment opened in the middle of the SUV's

floor, a computer screen and keyboard emerging.

Gwen set the baby monitor next to her, its soft static comforting her. She

powered up the system. On the roof of the SUV, an antennae the size of a

knitting needle revealed itself from the folds of the cracked skylight.

She logged in to the system, smiling as the familiar Torchwood logo

appeared on the screen. After they'd been so easily discovered by the CIA a

few months ago, and assuming that they might stil be being watched, Gwen

had agreed with Rhys that they'd keep computers and the internet out of their

home. Every week, Gwen scanned the house and their car for bugs. So far

they'd been left alone. If Rhys discovered this set-up, Gwen was sure, given

everything that she'd put him through, that this would be the proverbial last

straw.

'So we'l keep this our little secret,' she said, setting the baby monitor off to

the side.

Gwen googled 'supermarket madwoman' and found six versions already

uploaded to YouTube. After she'd played three of them and watched herself

attack the shop manager from a variety of angles, she was embarrassed, but,

she had to admit, she also felt a bit chuffed that she could stil defend herself,

that she could stil kick someone's arse.

No, Rhys was right, she thought. She real y did need an anger management

class. By no stretch of the imagination had she been defending herself or

Anwen. But stil , she couldn't stop herself from grinning as she replayed,

rewound and replayed again, the moment when she shoved the manager into

the breakfast cereals and the look of terror in his eyes.

Pausing the video, Gwen leaned back against what was left of the SUV's

dashboard, her heart racing. She'd snuck out here intending to use Torchwood

software to delete al record of the incident, but before she did she decided to

play the last of the four versions of the incident. This one had recorded from

the other side of the aisle so it had captured Gwen, Anwen clutched to her

chest, ducking out the emergency exit to make her escape. The person

recording had darted back to the woman and the paramedic after Gwen had

left. The local news had not shown any of this and when Gwen finished

watching it she could see why. As the medic slipped the jacket off the

woman's head, she gasped at the violence the woman had inflicted on herself.

Strange. Gwen's curiosity trumped anything else she had been feeling. She

opened another program on the computer and sent the same message she'd

been sending for the past three days, since she'd felt her life caving in on her.

Gwen heard Anwen cough, paused, listened for a beat, then she opened a

number of windows and scrol ed through screens, until she had access to the

local CCTV cameras outside the hospital in Swansea. When she recognised

the medics unloading the gurney with the madwoman strapped to it, Gwen

zoomed in on the image. They must have sedated her, Gwen thought. The

woman was unnatural y stil , her eyes wide open, and a bandaged taped to

the right side of her face.

Gwen noted the time stamp on the recording, closed out al but one of her

screens and in a few minutes had hacked into the patient admission records.

Before she could investigate further, she heard a car door slam through the

monitor. Shit. Rhys was home. He'd kil her if he discovered she had hidden al

of this equipment, never mind that she'd left Anwen.

'Come on, come on,' she said, scrol ing through screens until she found the

admission files for the day's patients.

From the baby monitor, she could hear Rhys's footsteps on the stairs, and,

of course, Anwen decided at that moment to stir. Gwen listened as her

whimpers began.

She found the database. Her fingers flew across the keyboard, her

adrenalin spiking. God, she missed this rush.

Anwen burst into ful -scale crying.

From the monitor, Gwen heard the bedroom door creak open. Anwen's crib

rattled, her screams increasing. Gwen heard the footsteps on the floor. She

heard Anwen's blankets rustle.

Gwen stopped typing, her hands frozen in mid-air. What if it wasn't Rhys?

22

'WHERE'S YOUR MUM then, luv?'

Gwen exhaled, not knowing what she would have done if the voice in the

monitor hadn't belonged to Rhys.

Three patients' records popped on the screen one after another, two

women and one man. She clicked on the man and scanned the A & E

admission notes. Drunk and disorderly, he'd cracked his head open outside a

pub.

Anwen's cries settled back to whimpers. Gwen could hear Rhys picking her

up from her crib. 'Is your mum asleep, pet?'

She heard the nursery door open and footsteps going down the hal .

Gwen clicked on the other two admission charts, scanned their notes too.

'What are the chances of that?' said Gwen. Frantical y, she emailed the charts

to her phone.

'Gwen Cooper!'

Gwen jumped. ‘Shit.’ The static on the baby monitor crackled loudly, the

anger in Rhys’s voice palpable. ‘Get back here. How could you leave Anwen

by her bloody self?’

Gwen grabbed the monitor and was about to answer that she was in

contact every second, but then remembered it wasn’t a radio, a realisation

that reinforced how much she missed her old life. How much she missed

Torchwood.

She listened to Rhys’s footsteps as he bounded down the stairs. She could

not have him come outside and find her here. He’d take away the only things

she had left that made her feel needed. Although, real y, what could he do? He

could lock her up in the attic like some wayward wife. He could take away her

daughter. He wouldn’t dare. Gwen’s anger knotted in her gut.

‘Gwen! Where are you?’

She was about to shut off the computer, when the screen fil ed with static.

What the hel ? Staring at the static, she ran her fingertips across the tracking

pad, but the static remained. She tried to shut down the computer. The static

remained. And then as if she’d stepped inside the noise, Gwen could see

nothing but grey noise and static around her.

Yet a part of her knew she was staring at a computer screen inside a shel

of an SUV in Wales. It was as if she was watching herself watching herself.

She shivered.

Somewhere ahead of her, Gwen could hear a low hum. Wait. Not a hum, a

growl.

Gwen tore her eyes away from the static on the screen. She felt sick. She

could hear the growling getting louder. What was it? Leaving the static

screaming on the screen, Gwen crawled to the side of the SUV and stared out

at the darkness. The windows in the SUV had been broken out ages ago.

This time she heard the low growl behind her.

Inside the SUV.

She whipped round, ready to attack, and found herself facing the most

beautiful animal she'd ever seen. Its skin was crushed velvet, its eyes like

polished stones – so black they shimmered blue. The puma went down on its

front paws, holding Gwen's gaze.

Gwen could see herself in the puma's eyes, then it was no longer her face

but the computer screen displaying a faint outline of an image, a geometric

design of some sort. She stretched her hand out towards the puma; the air

around its head felt dry and hot. It opened its mouth wide and took Gwen's

hand inside.

'Bloody hel , Gwen. Where are you?'

Gwen's eyes flew open. She was alone in the SUV. When was the last time

I ate or slept, she wondered. She looked down at her hand. It was wet and

sticky and there were tiny tears of blood on her knuckles.

Behind her an image throbbed against the static on the computer screen.

She tried not to stare at it again. In a panic, she sent a screen shot to her

phone.

The rock in Gwen's gut shifted, pressing down on her chest. Her lips felt

cracked and dry. Licking them, Gwen tasted peaches. She hated peaches.

Soft and slithery in her mouth. Rhys loved peaches. Gwen hated Rhys.

She slammed the computer closed, hid it underneath the compartment in the

floor again, brought down the antennae, and crawled from the SUV. Pul ing the

camouflage tarp back over it, Gwen slammed the garage door and sprinted

down the street.

23

THE ONLY PERSON making any noise at Gwen and Rhys's breakfast table the

next morning was Anwen, who was enjoying the chance to practice her latest

farmyard noises. Her squeals of delight were bouncing off the wal s as wel as

the stiff cold shoulders of her parents.

‘I don’t know what’s got into you, Gwen,’ said Rhys, spooning oatmeal into

Anwen’s mouth whenever she paused long enough from her babbling to take a

breath. ‘It’s not like you to leave Anwen alone.’

He handed the spoon to Anwen, reminding her how to hold it, laughing as

she plunged it into the oatmeal, scooping an upside-down spoonful to her

mouth, leaving most of it on her bib.

‘I’m sorry, Rhys. I’m real y sorry,’ said Gwen, buttering a slice of toast. Her

eyes were red-rimmed and puffy. ‘I just had to get out. I’ve been feeling so

cooped up here lately.’ She paused and offered the buttered toast to Rhys,

who arched his eyebrows but accepted it. ‘Friends?’

He tore the toast in half, handing the other half back to her. ‘Friends. But

don’t ever bloody wel do that again.’

‘For what it’s worth,’ Gwen said, ‘I had the monitor with me and I could hear

her the whole time. If anything had happened, I would have been back here in

a flash.’

‘Al gone!’ exclaimed Anwen with her hands in the air.

‘That’s not the point,’ said Rhys, taking the tray off the high chair and lifting

Anwen out. ‘You heard me come into the house, but I could’ve been anyone.

Could’ve taken her before you even knew she was gone.’

‘I know. I know. You’re right,’ Gwen said, taking Anwen from Rhys’s arms

and setting her on the floor next to a pile of colourful plastic blocks. She

refil ed her mug from the coffee pot.

Rhys was right. Of course, he was right. But did he have to keep reminding

her? She had said she was sorry. Many times. She had apologised last night

when she had come rushing inside, her head thumping. She’d lied about where

she’d been, blurting that she’d taken a walk to clear a headache, and this

morning she had apologised at least ten more times before they’d even come

downstairs for breakfast.

How many times did it take for him to get it into his thick skul ? Real y. How

many?

Gwen noticed her hands were shaking. Too much caffeine. She emptied her

coffee mug and put it in the sink. The clang sounded loud, like the noise her

dad’s welding gun made when he was in his workshop. Her dad. She

missed

him so much. He'd never had a chance to spend much time with his only

granddaughter.

Anwen had waddled her way across the floor to the pots and pans

cupboard and was in the process of emptying it.

'From now on, if you feel like getting away again, you need to tel me,' said

Rhys, handing Anwen a wooden spoon from the drawer next to the cooker.

Anwen banged the spoon against the pots, squealing with delight at the

racket.

'God knows I would've stayed home if you'd told me,' added Rhys, shouting

above Anwen's squeals and the radio news. 'And if you need a break during

the day from being home with Anwen, just say so. You know your mum wil

help when she gets back, and mine would be round here in a flash.'

Gwen whirled round. 'Oh, you'd like that, wouldn't you, Rhys Wil iams! You'd

like it if my mum or your mum had to take over because I'm doing such a bad

job as far as you're al concerned.'

'No!' said Rhys, pushing away from the table. 'That's not what I meant at al .

,

'Oh, isn't it? And I suppose I'm too stupid now to know what you

mean?

Poor Gwen, al cooped up in her own little world and making everyone so

unhappy!'

Anwen was suddenly quiet. Rhys was stunned at Gwen's outburst.

'Don't you two look at me like I'm some kind of mental patient.'

Anwen whimpered. Gwen stepped next to Rhys, jabbing her finger in his

chest. 'It's al right for you off al day at work, being treated like an adult,

having real conversations with people who can use the toilet and chew their

own food.'

Rhys couldn't help it, he laughed. This was his Gwen, his family-loving, alien-

kil ing, arse-kicking Gwen, and her behaviour these past few days was beyond

absurd.

Gwen shoved him against the refrigerator. 'Don't you dare laugh at me! I'm

sick of being stuck home here with her. I want my old life back. I want

Torchwood back.'

At that moment, Anwen cal ed out, 'Mummy sad.'

Gwen slapped her hand to her mouth and fled from the kitchen.

Anwen threw the spoon across the floor and burst into tears. 'Mummee!

Want Mummee.'

Rhys was in shock at how quickly this conversation, and his wife if he were

being honest, had deteriorated. This was worse even than last night's

confrontation. Rhys lifted Anwen into his arms.

'Want Mummee! Mummee!' She was flailing in his arms, her tiny fists

punching his shoulder, her anger rising.

Rhys carried Anwen into the sitting room and set her down. He gathered up

some of her toys and books and placed them next to her.

Anwen picked up a book and lobbed it. 'No book!' Then she slammed

herself onto her back and went into ful tantrum mode.

Rhys crouched next to her, reaching out and stroking her forehead, holding

out her favourite bear towards her. 'I know. I know. You want Mummy. I'l go

find her. I'l go get Mummy.'

'Mummeee!' she cried, hugging her bear.

'What is going on with the girls in this house?' Rhys blew Anwen a kiss as he

backed out into the hal way, closed the door on his sobbing child.

He could hear Gwen's sobs coming from the downstairs toilet. Shoving open

the bathroom door, Rhys stared in, horrified by what he saw.

Gwen was leaning in front of the basin, her head bowed, her hands gripping

its edges. Drops of blood were splashed across the mirror and dripping into

the basin.

‘Jesus, Gwen, what’ve you done?’

Rhys stepped slowly into the bathroom, edging behind her. But before he

could reach over, calm her, help her, anything, Gwen raised herself up on her

toes, whipped her head back, and smashed Rhys in his nose.

He toppled to the ground, slamming his wrist on the edge of the toilet. Gwen

crunched her boot into his other hand as she fled from the bathroom.

For a beat, Rhys couldn’t focus. He slouched against the stone floor, the

pain worse than anything he’d felt. She’d broken his bloody nose. He lifted his

hand to touch it, and worked out that his nose probably wasn’t broken but his

wrist might wel be. He yelped in pain, cradling his arm against his chest. He

could hear Gwen pounding up the stairs and al he could think of was

something had possessed her. Had to be. An alien. A ghost. Something.

Because this woman was not his wife.

From the sitting room, Anwen’s screams were growing fiercer by the

minute.

Ignoring Gwen’s blood splattered in the sink, Rhys yanked open the

medicine cabinet with his left hand, tearing through half-empty cough syrups,

boxes of plasters and handful of hair scrunchies until he found a rol of

bandage. After wrapping his wrist as best as he could with one hand, he made

to bolt from the toilet, only to step into a pool of Gwen's blood, crashing his

head against the basin this time.

Dazed, he lay with his cheek on the cold porcelain for a beat, and when he

could final y see straight, he pul ed himself up and careful y stepped out into

the hal way. Anwen's screams had died to a whimper.

At least she was safe.

Rhys fol owed Gwen's blood trail to the bottom of the stairs where he

stopped and listened. Gwen was moving around in the room upstairs. A

wardrobe door banged shut, drawers opened and slammed closed.

What the hel was she doing?

Rhys's pulse was rising, his breathing shal ow, and his wrist throbbing.

Above his head, he heard a table being knocked over. Then the bed creaked

as Gwen pushed it across the wood floor. Panic squeezed his chest, adrenalin

spiking his system.

In that instant, terror gripped Rhys. He understood exactly what Gwen was

doing. He had to stop her.

24

SERGEANT ANDY DAVIDSON carried a cup of milky tea and two chocolate biscuits

into the main Swansea squad room and settled at his new desk. This was his

favourite time of the work day, before too many of his shift had arrived to fil

the room and he had a couple of minutes to himself to review the night-watch

sergeant's notes before thinking about the day's assignments. He'd been

shuttled around South Wales quite a bit over the last couple of years, a series

of temporary attachments fol owing his unexpected promotion. He had a nasty

feeling that the top brass now saw him as more trouble than he was worth. An

unauthorised trip to London and a confrontation with some nameless MI5

spook had, Andy reckoned, led to this latest posting away from Cardiff.

Sliding his cup and saucer in front of his monitor, Andy set his hat on his

desk, mussing his short blond hair. He dunked his biscuit in his tea and scrol ed

through yesterday's reports. Two burglaries, a rash of shoplifting, a fight at the

cinema, disturbance of the peace at Bracelet Bay, an assault at the university

library, an arson in a local stable, and a supermarket confrontation that had

resulted in the store being closed for the rest of the day.

CID had been cal ed in to the supermarket incident and the assault in the

library. The detectives were stil investigating the latter, but an arrest warrant

had been issued an hour ago in the former. When Andy read the name on the

warrant, his biscuit slipped from his fingers and dissolved into his tea.

‘Damn,’ he said, licking the melting chocolate from his fingers. Pushing his

cup aside, he clicked on the ful report. The more he read, the more he thought

the assault on the manager didn’t sound like his Gwen. And the other woman,

the one who’d ripped her ear off, wel , she was obviously a nut job. Maybe

escaped from the Del more Institute, he thought. Stil , he’d have to bring in

Gwen. He’d do it himself, first thing after morning rol cal . It was the least he

could do for his friend.

When he finished reading the supermarket file, something ‘pinged’ in his

head. His new girlfriend, Bonnie from Blackpool, was taking psychology

classes at the local col ege and she was teaching Andy to pay attention to his

instincts, to be open to his ‘buried tiger.’

Grrr! Andy grinned at the thought of her. What would Bonnie have made of

Gwen, he wondered.

The old Andy Davidson would have taken his hunch to his superiors, then

settled back at his empty desk with his tea and biscuits. But this was the new

Andy, and just because he'd turned down a transfer to bigger police districts to

stay close to his mum didn't mean he wasn't ambitious, a trait Bonnie was

fiercely encouraging. Andy was doing his best to please her in every way and

if she liked his buried tiger, then he was going to keep it roaring.

Andy scrol ed back to the notes he'd read on the assault at the university.

Something odd about that one, too.

Gulping down his lukewarm tea, Andy snatched up the rest of his chocolate

biscuits and headed out of the squad room.

25

RHYS TOOK THE narrow stairs two at a time, slipping once on the carpet tread,

forgetting about his wrist and putting both hands down to steady himself.

Ignoring the pain that shot up his right arm, he crawled up the last few stairs

on al fours. At the upstairs landing, he paused, steadying his breathing,

focusing on Gwen's whereabouts.

He couldn't hear her movements now. Where was she? He tucked himself

into an alcove at the end of the hal way and listened. Had she found what she

was looking for?

Something heavy thumped to the floor and he realised that Gwen was

tearing through the chest of drawers in Mary's room. Why was she looking in

there? Rhys stood up, his head aching, his wrist throbbing. He was puzzled –

pleased, but puzzled. If Gwen was in Mary's room, then she wasn't looking for

the key to her weapons store after al – she knew exactly where that was.

Or had she lost her memory as wel as her mind?

Gwen let out a shriek from the bedroom and then came flying into the

hal way, spotted Rhys standing stunned at the other end and charged him.

Rhys darted out of the way, tripped and tumbled down the stairs, final y able

to stop himself before crashing through the banister at the bottom. He couldn't

let himself waste time thinking about what new parts of his body were broken.

Scrambling to his feet, he scampered like a wild animal back up the stairs,

hol ering at Gwen to stop. This time when he got to the landing, he could hear

Gwen tearing up their bedroom.

His heart stopped when she stood laughing at him in the bedroom doorway,

the key to her gun locker dangling from her hand.

With al his strength, Rhys threw himself at his wife. They fel backwards

into the bedroom, careening off the wardrobe, and, with Gwen pummel ing him

with her fists and spitting obscenities at him, they crashed to the floor. Rhys's

head smashed against the wooden base of the bed and for a second

everything went black. It was enough time for Gwen to free herself from his

clutches and dart from the room.

Rhys pul ed himself up, the pain of his injuries nothing compared to the

terrible fear that gripped his insides. Gwen had the key and he could hear her

thundering down the stairs.

Anwen was silent, having final y cried herself to sleep.

Please God, let Gwen come after me first, thought Rhys.

He crawled out to the landing. Phone. The stairs in front of him were rol ing

and he felt like he was going to vomit. He had to get help.

Because what if he couldn't stop Gwen? Or worse, what if he passed out

before he could even try.

Rhys patted his pockets. Shit. No phone. He remembered it was sitting on

the kitchen table. Swal owing back bile, he peered over the banister. Gwen

had dragged the gun locker up from the basement. It was on the floor near the

front door and she was starting to unlock it. He wasn't going to be able to cal

for help; he'd have to stop her on his own.

No choice, mate.

By the time Rhys was halfway down the stairs, Gwen had popped up the lid

of the locker. She glanced at Rhys when he leapt the last few stairs, landing in

front of her. She lifted out her gun, and Rhys thought he was a dead man.

Gwen pointed the gun at his chest, screaming, ‘You’re not leaving me here

alone any more! I wil not smel peaches any more.’

‘OK, love, OK. You can do whatever you want. It’s your decision, but let’s

make it without the gun,’ said Rhys, taking two steps closer, reaching his arms

out to her, pain shooting to his shoulder from his swel ing wrist, his voice

hol ow in his head.

‘Don’t you come near me, your words have too many points,’ Gwen hissed,

stabbing the gun at Rhys. ‘You’re hurting me.’

‘Fine. I’l stay right here.’ He backed up slowly. ‘But can you please put the

gun away, Gwen. You need help. Can’t you see? This isn’t you talking.’

From behind him Rhys could hear the creak of a floorboard, the scrape of a

chair shifting, and then the living room door swung open and Anwen toddled

out into the hal .

‘Mummy! Uppie.’

ON HIS WAY down the cracked tile stairs, Andy passed some of his officers on

their way up from the ground-floor lockers. He greeted them distractedly, stil

puzzling over what he'd read in yesterday's incident reports. Two floors down,

he stopped outside the security door to the video surveil ance unit. Andy's

mate Tommy Livesy, who played rugby with him on the over-30 team, was on

duty. Good – Tommy would keep Andy's request quiet until he figured out

exactly what his discovery meant. Andy may have been listening to his inner

tiger, but he didn't think anyone else would listen without some persuading.

Swiping his identification on the keypad, Andy shoved the door open. A bank

of computers in a horseshoe faced him with two officers watching a hundred

screens of CCTV feeds and a few private security cameras in financial

buildings in Swansea.

His mate turned when the door opened. 'Andy, my man. What brings you to

our lair?'

'Nothing important. A couple of questions from last night's watch.' Andy

nodded at the other officer at the desk. Tommy got the message. 'Jan, a

minute. I'l keep an eye.'

Jan grabbed her cigarettes and lighter, but when she passed Andy she

stopped and put her hand out. Andy rol ed his eyes and handed over his last

two chocolate biscuits. She smiled and left.

‘So what’s up?’

Andy pul ed Jan’s chair next to Tommy’s. ‘Have you got the CCTV from that

supermarket disturbance yesterday?’

‘Give me a second.’

While Andy waited, he watched the men, women and children, moving

across the screens in front of him. It was mesmerising and he wondered how

anyone could keep track, and then he decided that maybe it was best if they

couldn’t.

‘Got it. I’l send it to the screen on the top left.’

He did and it took Andy a few seconds to adjust his attention to what he

was looking at. The camera was on the shop’s front door, sweeping across

the aisles every minute or two, which meant that Andy could only see the

events in the breakfast aisle at a distance. Plus, the shifting camera made it

feel like he was looking at a video flipbook, the sweep of the camera across

the store far from smooth.

Didn’t matter. Only a few minutes in, Andy was watching Gwen

Cooper

assault the store manager.

Andy reached for his notebook, quickly finding the page with the file

numbers and names for the other two local disturbances. Tommy took the

notebook up, glancing at the page before he passed it back to Andy. ‘Did you

want to see the video for that one, too? Strange times there and al .’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Andy, sitting back down.

‘DI Horn was in here first thing this morning asking for the video for that file,’

answered Tommy. ‘Thought maybe you were working the case too.’

‘Let’s have a look, then,’ said Andy, turning back to the screens. ‘And if

anyone asks, I’m working both cases.’

‘This video’s in colour so it’s not as grainy as the first one.’ Tommy cued up

the video and Andy realised immediately that he was looking at a floor in an

imposing-looking building. ‘It’s the main library at the university. They’ve had

problems with students having sex in the stacks.’

‘I’d’ve checked out a book once or twice,’ laughed Andy, ‘if I’d known that

was going on.’

‘They instal ed a state-of-the-art surveil ance system last term.’ Tommy fast-

forwarded the video. ‘Check out the curly-haired dude with the droopy pants.’

Andy and Tommy watched as a young male student and his giggling

girlfriend turned into an aisle of floor-to-ceiling books where they became a

snogging frenzy of clumsy clutches and slobbering kisses.

The camera was angled in such a way that the students were never quite in

ful view, the camera catching them only when they moved out of the canyon

of books and into the camera's ful field of vision. Their antics were clearly not

the main event, though – Tommy sped up the camera, hitting play when the

students were attempting to loosen each other's jeans.

At that moment, a middle-aged woman in a tan shirt dress with a wide belt

sprinted across the screen and charged into the couple, taking them both

down.

'Jesus,' said Andy, 'where did she come from?' He knew from his notes that

the woman was the head librarian.

'Oh, that's nothing,' said Tommy. 'Keep watching.'

At first the coupling students were too stunned to react, but after the young

man got his jeans fastened and scrambled up from the floor, he grabbed the

librarian and tried to haul her off his girlfriend. The older woman reached

above her head, grabbed a hefty tome from the shelf and, with al her weight

behind the swing, she smacked the book across the young man's head,

splitting his lip and sending a tooth flying.

'Ow!' said Andy, putting his hand to his own mouth. 'That had to hurt.'

The young man crumbled to the floor, obviously in considerable pain. For a

few beats, none of the three were visible on the screen until the young

woman, screaming hysterical y, came back into view, slammed into the

librarian, pinning her to the floor with her knees.

'What the hel is she doing?' asked Andy, leaning closer to the screen.

'According to DI Horn, the student pummel ed the librarian's face to a pulp.'

Andy kept his eye on the screen, trying to track the girl's movements

separately from the librarian's, but it was difficult because of the camera's

angle and their heightened frenzy. A few seconds later, the noise had

attracted three nearby students, who charged the women on the floor, pul ing

the girl off the librarian, holding her back until university security rushed into

the stacks and imposed control.

Tommy stopped the tape. 'According to Horn, al three are in the emergency

ward at St Helen's. The boyfriend's had surgery on his jaw and the young

woman's in shock. Horn's trying to sort out what happened.'

'Too bad we don't have another angle,' said Andy. 'I don't suppose we've got

any students with their mobiles on this.'

'Nah. Horn said even the students who pul ed them apart didn't see the

actual assault. Just the aftermath.'

Andy stared more closely at the paused tape, at the young woman's back

as she sat astride the librarian, her arms frozen in the air above her head, her

knees pressed against the librarian's shoulders. Andy was thinking about the

similarities that had caught his attention in the first place about this case. He

could hear Bonnie nudging him to think.

The woman in the shop had ripped off the lobe of her own ear while Gwen

and the manager were having their wrestling match, and here was this librarian

with serious facial wounds, the result of an equal y bizarre attack.

'Can you rewind to right before the librarian comes into the frame?'

'I can,' said Tommy. On the screen, the entwined couple shift in and out of

the frame, their energetic coupling no longer Andy's focus.

'Stop,' said Andy, pointing to the corner of the screen as the librarian came

into view. 'Can you get any closer?'

Tommy zoomed in on the librarian's shoulder's and the side of her face.

'Jesus! What the hel ?' said Tommy.

'That girl didn't hurt the librarian,' said Andy, staring at the blurry

angle of the

side of the librarian's face, and what looked like the librarian's eyebal resting

on her cheek. 'I think the girl was trying to restrain the librarian. Stop her from

mutilating any more of her own face.'

'Now that's seriously messed up.'

'Seriously,' said Andy.

27

GWEN BLINKED FAST, shaking her head, but she kept her gun pointed at Rhys,

ignoring her daughter teetering against the door jamb.

'I think I need to go,' Gwen said, the words coming out in a strange squeaky

pitch. But instead of taking a step back, Gwen took two steps towards Rhys,

making any shot she took at him sure to hit Anwen too.

Keeping his eye on Gwen, Rhys shifted over to the centre of the hal way, his

arm a dead weight against his side, his fingers throbbing. If he could keep

Gwen talking, maybe she'd come to her senses, but he stil had to get Anwen

out of the line of fire.

'What're you thinking you want to do here, Gwen, love?' he asked taking

two steps back towards the living room door where Anwen was playing with

the fringes on the end of the carpet runner.

‘You need to give me time to think. I need time to think!’ Gwen said, her

voice heavy with rage. ‘Let. Me. Think!’ She banged the side of the gun off the

side of her head. One, two, three times, as if she was trying to pound sense

into it. Rhys gasped, horrified the gun might go off, but before he could move,

Gwen turned it back on him.

Holding the gun steady, she aimed at his chest, but her gaze was locked on

a point directly over his shoulder. Gwen’s concentration was so fierce that

Rhys was sure someone was standing behind him.

Gwen was now muttering under her breath as if she was talking to

someone, having an angry conversation that wasn’t going her way.

Gesticulating wildly, she began to toss the gun back and forth from her left to

her right hand as if someone was trying to grab it from her.

With his wife’s focus distracted, Rhys decided this might be his only chance

to move. But which way? Forward to try to disarm Gwen, risk her firing the

gun and Anwen becoming col ateral damage? Or backwards, remove Anwen

from the situation, and take his chances with Gwen and the gun?

Gwen steadied the gun at Rhys’s head. She released the safety. Rhys

made his decision. He pivoted, reached down and shoved Anwen onto the

living room floor, then reached back, slamming the door quickly, praying she'd

be safer loose in the living room than in the hal way with her deranged mother.

Gwen screamed, 'No! No!'

The gun edged up a little and she fired, shattering the mirror behind Rhys.

He threw himself to the floor. Gwen fired again. Rhys rol ed against the door

to the basement, cracking his shoulder against the hard wood. Stil screaming,

Gwen fired wide and missed again.

Stunned, Rhys understood what she was doing. Gwen was fighting with

herself, her face twitching madly, her eyes narrowed one second and then

wide and panicked the next, trying desperately to stop whatever was in her

head tel ing her to shoot her husband.

Cowering in the corner, Rhys watched helplessly as the angry Gwen took

aim at his head. The Gwen who loved him, who adored their daughter, was

not winning this fight.

A horrified expression crossed Gwen's face. Her shoulders stiffened, her

head tensed, and with blood trickling down her arm, she tightened both hands

on the grip of the gun. Her stance wavered a fraction of an inch. Gwen's face

reddened, her concentration bulging the veins on her neck. She fired.

The shot went high. Rhys scrambled further into the shadows, broken glass

stabbing into his knees. At least if she keeps shooting at me, he thought, she

can't hurt Anwen.

'Stop moving, you stupid, stupid man.' Gwen's voice was a low growl.

'You're only making this harder on yourself.'

Rhys clambered up and stepped out of the corner. 'Gwen, you've got to try

to fight this… whatever this is that's tel ing you to hurt me. You need to think

about al of the good times we've had together and al of the good times that

we can have with Anwen.'

'Wil you please shut up, Rhys,' Gwen sobbed, the gun shaking in her

trembling hands. 'It's just al so sour. Nothing matters any more.'

Gwen lifted the gun, aiming directly at Rhys's chest. This time there was no

chance she'd miss.

'I love you, Gwen Cooper.'

Gwen fired. Rhys jumped. Gwen's shoulder jerked forward and she

col apsed at Rhys's feet. He lunged for Gwen's gun, prising it from her fingers

and tossing it over her body to the tal figure in the military coat who loomed in

the doorway.

Holstering his Webley, Jack Harkness rushed to Gwen's side.

‘Why’d you wait so bloody long?’ screamed Rhys, clambering into the living

room to rescue Anwen. ‘I spotted you through the window when I put Anwen in

here.’ Rhys pressed his frightened daughter to his chest. ‘She could have kil ed

me, you bastard.’

Jack smiled and shrugged, kneeling next to Gwen, who had hit her temple

on the floor when she went down and was moaning, drifting in and out of

consciousness. Checking her pulse, Jack sighed with relief. It was strong.

Rhys glared at him. If it hadn’t been for Anwen, he’d have bloody wel

punched the sod.

‘I had to be sure she was real y going to shoot you, didn’t I?’ said Jack,

grinning. ‘I couldn’t risk shooting Gwen for no good reason. I like her better

than you, remember?’

‘You’re stil a bastard, you know that,’ hissed Rhys, keeping his attention on

Anwen who had spotted her wounded mother lying on the hal way floor. ‘But

thank you.’

‘Mummy sleeping?’

‘Yes, Anwen, your mummy’s sleeping,’ shushed Jack, taking off his coat and

placing it careful y under Gwen’s head. ‘We need to get her to the hospital.

This is a nasty wound on her head and her shoulder's going to need a little

work.'

'I think it'l have to be a prison ward,' said Andy's familiar voice from the front

door. 'I can't believe I'm saying this, but I need to arrest Gwen.'

28

WHILE ANDY RADIOED for an ambulance, Rhys cal ed Mary and told her what had

happened to Gwen, giving as few details as possible.

While they waited, Jack sat at Gwen's side and Rhys paced the floor with

Anwen drowsy on his shoulder.

'You could put Anwen in her cot,' said Jack. 'I'm not going anywhere. I'm

sure Gwen's going to be OK.'

'I'm not leaving you alone with my wife! You might shoot her again.'

'Hey, don't forget it was you she was trying to kil , not me.'

'Gwen's been acting real y strange for a few days now,' said Rhys. 'I don't

know what's got into her.'

'It not just Gwen,' said Andy.

'What do you mean?' said Jack, already working through possible scenarios

in his own mind for what might have driven Gwen to such violence. As the

sirens grew louder, Jack saw yel ow dots bounce in his peripheral vision.

Andy fil ed them in on what he'd learned at the station, why he had to arrest

Gwen and the strange pattern he'd uncovered of other women in the area

losing their marbles. 'And it's not just that they've gone a bit balmy,' added

Andy. 'They also hurt themselves in pretty disgusting ways.'

The arrival of an ambulance and two panda cars interrupted him. 'I'l ride

with you and Gwen to the hospital,' Andy said to Rhys, 'and then we'l see

where to go from there. But it makes you wonder, doesn't it?'

'Wonder what?' asked Rhys.

'Wel , if maybe there's something in the water that's making women, you

know, bonkers.'

Jack hid a wince at Andy's expression. 'How many other women did you say

have lost their senses and mutilated themselves?' he asked careful y.

'Since yesterday,' said Andy, 'three more round here and at least three or

four further north. Could be more by now.'

'I'm pretty sure,' said Jack, checking Gwen's pulse again, then packing a

second clean tea towel against the wound on her shoulder, 'that whatever's

going on, it's not in the water. But when you get back to the station, Andy, you

might want to alert everyone to a possible increase in domestic violence.' He

paused, grinning at Rhys. ‘I’m guessing Gwen might not be the only wife who

wants to shoot her husband.’

‘Very funny,’ said Rhys. ‘Since you’re so smart, what do you think’s

happening?’

Before Jack could answer, Gwen moaned and slowly opened her eyes.

Jack tasted peaches. He loved peaches, but he hadn’t been thinking about

them at al . He wasn’t even hungry.

Gwen stared up at Jack, gasped, panicked, tried to sit up, but couldn’t.

‘What happened?’ She whimpered, her memory flooding back, her eyes

widening. She cried out, touching her hand to the wound on her shoulder,

grimacing at the sopping towel.

Rhys crouched next to her. ‘I’m here, love. So’s Anwen, and we’re both OK.

Real y.’

Gwen burst into tears, looking first at Rhys, then at Anwen, and final y back

at Jack. Outside, two medics were dashing towards the front door, a police

constable jogging behind them.

‘Who shot me?’

‘I did,’ nodded Jack, sweeping her damp fringe off her face.

‘I guess it was my turn,’ said Gwen, taking Jack’s hand and squeezing it.

Then her eyes fluttered closed and she drifted once again to

unconsciousness.

As Jack released Gwen's hand, he noticed her forearm was bleeding. 'What

happened here?' He rol ed up her sleeve, staring at a recent wound sliced into

her arm.

'Christ,' said Rhys, his face draining of colour. 'That must have been what

she was doing in the bathroom. She was cutting herself.'

Jack slid his phone from his pocket and before the medics insisted he get

out of their way, he clicked a picture of the three overlapping circles Gwen

had razored into her flesh.

*

Later, Jack sat in the house waiting for Mary to arrive. He struggled to

remember where he'd seen that shape tattooed on Gwen's arm before. On his

phone, he looked more closely at the design, puzzled.

With Anwen playing at his feet, Jack sketched the shape on a sheet of

paper, over and over again. He stared at it intently, ran his fingers over it,

feeling a familiarity with its overlapping lines and its strange ancient aesthetic,

but whenever he thought he had a sense of where he'd seen it before and

what it meant, whenever he tried to concentrate, to get his mind to snag the

memory, it was useless. Whatever this image was, it kept col apsing

under his

scrutiny.

The Ice Maiden

29

North Atlantic, same day as the supermarket incident

A FIERCE STORM was buffeting the *Ice Maiden*, a survey ship trawling in the

North Sea near the cusp of the Skaggerak Strait. Henry ‘Cash’ Col ins, a brick-

house Scotsman – handsome, solid, dependable – stood in the wheelhouse,

tucking his flannel shirt into his unzipped jeans, an unlit cigar clamped between

his teeth. He checked the radar one more time to be sure. This one was going

to be bad. He could feel it in his arthritic knees. Pressing a button on the

control panel, he gave the orders to lock the ship down.

T he *Ice Maiden* was a beam trawler, equipped to navigate the violent

northern seas. Years earlier, Cash and his father had dragged for blue-

mouthed redfish in between survey trips for British Petroleum and Exxon – plus

more than a few covert dril ing operations around the globe for organisations

only one or two folks knew about. When his father died, Cash changed the

ship’s name, retrofitted it with air cannons, state-of-the-art sonar trawls,

acoustic sensors and a ful deck of mostly il egal electronic equipment,

chartering the *Ice Maiden*'s services out to oceanic and geology departments

of universities and scientific institutes. Only on the rare instances when he

needed money would Cash prostitute the trawler's services to a government

or an agency that wanted a mission run under the radar.

This was one of those times.

Cash's principles had nothing to do with his politics, which were situational,

and everything to do with his intense-to-the point-of-obsessive curiosity about

the world's oceans. Henry 'Cash' Col ins had never met an authority figure he

could stomach for more than ten minutes, including, if truth be told, his own

father.

Before the storm hit, Cash had been losing a game of strip poker to his

second-in command, and current ex-wife, Dana, the daughter of a Swedish

shipping magnate. Dana was tal and athletic with short blonde hair. She had

once worked with MI5 on a mission using the *Ice Maiden*. She now

considered the ship her home, loving it as much as, if not a wee bit more than,

she loved Cash.

Clipped to a safety harness out on the aft deck in ful storm gear – a

hooded slicker, thigh-high black wel ingtons and skintight black rubber trousers

– Dana looked like a lanky teenager dressed as a Storm Trooper as she

punched through the driving wind and sheets of rain to reach the main sonar

winch. Cash was watching her from the wheelhouse, realising, and not for the

first time, that he'd real y screwed up when he'd, wel , real y screwed up.

Cash had already secured the computer gear in the wheelhouse with two of

the trawler's crew, Nick Finley and Byron Austin. Both had been dishonourably

discharged from the US Navy for dealing in contraband prescription drugs.

Finn was a wiry Irish-American, whose nickname was not only a natural

result of his surname, but also because he'd spent most of his young adult life

negotiating the treacherous waters of the Baltimore docks, where only sharks

survived. Using a brick-sized remote control, Finn was now locking down and

securing the satel ite dish.

His col eague Byron was an African-American from Chicago, whose

grandfather had served with Cash's father in the Second World War. He was

double-checking their munitions hold. Given the increase in piracy in many of

the oceans in which the *Ice Maiden* had sailed recently, their weapons were

as important as any of their sophisticated sonar and computer equipment.

Below deck, the ship's cook, a dangerous-looking ex-shrimp boater from

New Orleans named Hol is, and the head engineer, a lithe Canadian named

Sam, were ignoring the boat's increasingly rol ing gait. They were watching a

footbal match on the flat screen bolted to the wal . When Finn shut down the

satel ite dish, a wave of static rippled across the television and the picture

went black.

'Wel , Jesus, marry my mother and have a cow,' said Hol is, his southern

accent at its thickest when he was pissed. He pushed away from the table

and walked to the door, his legs steady despite the ship's rocking movement.

He looked both ways down the empty passageway, then lifted the com unit

from the wal and depressed the button. He listened for a few seconds.

'No one in the wheel house,' he said, returning to his beer and to Sam, who

was shuffling a deck of cards.

'A storm,' said Sam, who'd been raised in a commune outside San

Francisco, cultivating hemp and sixteen varieties of tomatoes. Sam had a chip

on his shoulder the size of Mount Rushmore and hated any conversations that

required he talk about his hippy family or his mixed racial ethnicity. He was the

perfect recruit for this crew, a man with no real ties to a country and a

conscience easily adapted to the needs of a situation. ‘I heard the whistle in

the boiler room. Could be a long cold night.’

‘So what’l it be, then?’ asked Sam, arching his eyebrows. ‘Poker, a movie

or what?’

Hol is grinned at him, a smile that could sink ships. ‘Oh, ah’m thinking the “or

what”.’

‘Or what, nothing,’ said Dana, stepping into the room, stripping off her wet

gear until she stood in front of them in damp long-johns, her short hair

plastered to her head. ‘Cash and I haven’t eaten since breakfast and this

storm’s already on us. We need al hands on deck, boys, not on each other.’

‘Dana, darlin’,’ said Hol is, stepping around Sam but not without giving him a

light slap on his cheek. ‘Your meal’s right here, hon, hot and delicious,’ he

turned and winked at Sam, ‘like me.’ He slid two lidded plates from the gal ey’s

top oven. ‘Anyway, Cash always thinks the worst of any storm.’

Sam began shuffling the cards as Cash stepped into the mess, handed

Dana a thick towel and accepted his plate from Hol is.

‘Poker, it is,’ said Sam.

*

While at sea, the *Ice Maiden* flew under the research flag of the United

Nations, a banner that afforded her a certain camouflaged mobility, but when

they docked for supplies they displayed either the New Zealand stars or the

Canadian maple leaf, both about the most friendly non-combative symbols and

nations' flags under which you could fly.

With the exception of Cash, and, so everyone in the crew assumed, Dana

too, the rest of the group did not know what (or who) was funding this latest

enterprise. Since the mission began, the crew's wages had been deposited

into their accounts from an organisation cal ed the International Institute of

Geological Defense with an IP address and a PO Box that suggested

headquarters in the Faroe Islands and Puerto Rico. The benefits were

generous, and although the ship's shel and hul had seen better days, the

deposit from this current mission had meant Cash could afford a long overdue

upgrade to his crew's quarters, the facilities in the kitchen, and one or two

pieces of sophisticated (and once again il egal) trawling equipment he'd been

eyeing for a long time.

For this mission, the crew of the *Ice Maiden* had been tasked to monitor the

earth's oceans like a newborn, checking her temperatures from every

possible

geological angle, observing the slightest changes in wind currents, charting

weather patterns and tidal changes, migration shifts and marine population

fluctuations. In the past months the crew had sunk so many devices deep into

the oceans and recorded so many sonograms from the Indian Ocean to the

South Pacific from the Antarctic to the North Atlantic that the *Ice Maiden* had

gathered an overwhelming mass of data. Cash had been transmitting their

findings to the Institute for Geological Defense, but he doubted that anyone,

even there, could possibly be making any sense of it.

Cash was convinced that, although the world had shifted out of crisis mode,

countries and their governments had slid back into neutral, cruising along as

before, trusting that everything and everyone had returned to normal, turning a

blind eye to anything that might suggest trouble was once again looming.

He hoped that al the data they were gathering was suggesting nothing too

far out of the ordinary, but he doubted that.

He was right, and he was terribly wrong.

Gwen

GWEN'S SHOULDER HAD been cleaned and dressed. Seeing her flailing like a

maniac on a hospital bed, her wrists strapped to the bed's safety bars, her

hair matted and oily and her arms bruised and bandaged – it was al more

than Rhys could stand. He went into the corridor to wait for Jack.

Thankful y, the detectives from CID investigating the other incidents of

violence and disorderly conduct had gone. They had decided that Gwen, like

the other affected women, should be restrained and sedated until the doctors

could figure out what had caused their mental breakdowns and their severe

self-mutilations.

Stepping out of the lift onto the psychiatric care floor, Jack was immediately

assaulted by Gwen's anger. He felt it in his knees, a shooting pain, and he

tasted it in his mouth – like onions. Gwen's shouts of profanity and her

screaming insults were being directed at someone named 'Suzie'.

Rhys was crouched against the wal opposite the Plexiglas screens of the

secure ward, the guard at the enclosed desk near the lift watching his every

move. Rhys's head was buried in his hands, but when he saw Jack he slowly

stood up.

‘How is she?’ asked Jack looking into the ward, a headache beginning

behind his eyes. Gwen was in the first of four beds, writhing against the

ministrations of two nurses and a burly male orderly while the doctor, a petite

woman in a white lab coat, keyed notes into a tablet. Jack noticed that the

other three beds were each occupied with seriously injured women, al

sedated, their IV drips standing at attention next to their beds like thin alien

sentinels.

‘She’s bad, Jack,’ said Rhys, his voice catching in his throat. ‘Because of her

concussion, the doctor didn’t want to put her completely under, but they may

have no choice. Her anger is out of control. She’s a danger to herself. To

everyone.’

The doctor swiped her ID card at the panel inside the room. She came out

and stepped over to them. Jack figured her to be in her early forties, her

caramel-coloured skin flawless. She was short, attractive and professional in a

pale green blouse and a navy pencil skirt that showed enough of her legs to

make Jack and Rhys notice. The badge on her white lab coat identified her as

Dr Olivia Steele.

‘Mr Wil iams, I’m Dr Steele. May I have a word?’ She proffered her

arm,

guiding Rhys down the hal for privacy.

Rhys nodded his head towards Jack. ‘He’s family… brother-in-law. He can

hear whatever you have to say.’

Jack smiled warmly at Rhys, despite the worsening headache, and the

intensity of the sour taste in his mouth.

Dr Steele nodded. ‘Very wel , but to be honest, I don’t have much to tel you,

Mr Wil iams. Your wife is experiencing a kind of hysterical neurosis and it may

be a while before we understand what triggered it.’ She looked from Rhys to

Jack. ‘Is there any history of mental il ness in your family?’

‘Not that I know of,’ answered Jack before Rhys could process the

question. ‘And if there is or was, I’d know…’

‘There’s none,’ said Rhys, emphatical y, glaring at Jack who rol ed his eyes

and shrugged. ‘But what did you mean, it may take a while? How long is a

while exactly?’

Dr Steele gently touched Rhys’s forearm. ‘With the right combination of

drugs, a few days if we’re lucky, and that wil al ow us to talk with Gwen and

examine her without such acute physical symptoms. Her real treatment wil

depend on how severe the roots of her neurosis are.’ The doctor continued

talking to Rhys, but her eyes were fol owing Jack as he shifted to stand at the

security glass, staring into the busy ward, his jaw clenched, his hands deep in

his pockets.

‘If your wife has experienced some kind of trauma that has led to this

breakdown,’ she went on, turning back to Rhys, ‘then that wil have to be

addressed, too, and that may take years.’

‘What about these other women?’ interrupted Jack. ‘Are they also suffering

from some kind of hysterical neurosis?’

The doctor walked over next to Jack and fol owed his gaze into the room.

‘I’m afraid I can’t discuss my other patients with you.’

‘Even if they may al be suffering from a similar hysteria? Could this be

related to… you know, them al being female?’ asked Jack, looking directly at

Dr Steele.

The doctor looked at Jack, anger flashed in her eyes. ‘This is not the

nineteenth century, Mr…?’

‘Harkness. Captain Jack Harkness.’

‘Captain Harkness, your sister isn’t a character in a Brontë novel. She’s

suffering from a very real mental il ness that has affected an organ in her body

and not, quite frankly, her uterus. The kind of female hysteria you’re implying

was nothing more than the patriarchal repressive sexual fantasies of

the

Victorian medical establishment. Your sister's brain, like these other women, is

suffering from something quite real. The fact that it's her mind we're dealing

with makes it more complicated and more frightening, but I'm more than

equipped to help her.'

'So you're convinced there's no pattern to be determined,' continued Jack,

folding his arms, noting the doctor's mouth twitch slightly. 'That there's no

related causes in the fact that four females from the same immediate area

have experienced a similar hysteria?'

'Oh, for God's sake,' continued the doctor, her rant picking up steam. 'Freud

might have believed that Gwen was suffering from some uncontrol able

emotional tantrum and just because of timing and one or two similarities

among these women,' she swept her hand along the window, 'that they're

somehow sharing in that suffering. But, Captain Harkness, let me tel you that,

despite what you may have read in the media about what happened to these

women and to Gwen, mental il ness is not contagious and your sister and

these other women are not simply hysterical women.'

Jack nodded and tried to look appropriately contrite.

‘If you’l excuse me.’ She turned back to Rhys. ‘Mr Wil iams, I’l keep you

posted on your wife’s condition. For now, I’d suggest you get some rest, the

days and months ahead could be long ones for you and your family.’

The door opened again, this time to let one of the nurses out. Gwen’s

screams were muted, but Jack could stil hear her cal ing for what now

sounded like ‘Schoozie’.

‘May I speak to my sister?’

‘If you must,’ said the doctor, as she headed towards the elevator, ‘but

make it brief. I need her to rest. The medication wil help her sleep, but I also

need to see her blood pressure and her adrenalin levels come down to much

safer levels.’

When the elevator closed on the doctor, Jack pul ed his mobile from the

inside of his coat pocket.

The guard at the desk glared at him. ‘Hey, you can’t use a mobile in here.

Give that over.’

Jack ignored him.

Rhys was staring sadly through the security glass at Gwen, who was slowly

becoming less agitated. ‘Who’re you cal ing?’ he asked.

‘Dr Steele is wrong, Rhys. There’s a pattern to al this. These woman are

not just some kind of statistical anomaly. The doctor confirmed that al these

woman are suffering from similar delusions, from similar mental breakdowns,

to say nothing of the fact that al of them mutilated themselves in some way.'

Both men looked more closely at each of the women in the ward, this time

paying more attention to their other injuries. The woman in the bed closest to

Gwen had her head bandaged, the dressing covering the entire left side of her

face. Opposite her, a woman in her late twenties had her arm in a cast, only

three fingers visible. The third, a heavy middle-aged woman with untidy curls

of hair had a thick white patch dressed on her left eye, raw pink welts and

lines of scratches covering her cheeks.

Gwen's right shoulder was bound in bandages, soft leather straps fastened

across her chest and restraints on her legs to keep her frenetic movements

restricted. She looked smal and frail, and as he looked at her Jack's heart

cracked a little more.

'Something wrong?' asked Rhys. 'I need to get home to Anwen so Mary can

come see Gwen. I can't be taking care of you too, mate.'

'Go,' said Jack, his knees aching terribly. 'I'l sit with Gwen until Mary gets

here.’

‘Sure?’

‘More than.’

When Rhys had gone, Jack tapped a number into his mobile. The guard

banged on his window.

‘Is this line secure?’ asked Jack. ‘Good. I need you to do something for me.’

Jack laughed at something the cal er said after Jack explained his request.

‘Of course, you should do it Torchwood style.’

The Ice Maiden

31

IN THE COMMUNICATIONS room opposite the newly refurbished mess, the *Ice*

Maiden’s two analysts sat in front of a bank of computers. Like Sam and

Hol is, they were also ignoring the increasingly violent rise and fal of the ship

as she sailed into the storm. Vlad Lidenbrok had his feet up on the desk,

reading a Steampunk novel balanced on his lap while his computer was

plotting a geologic map, its waves of reds, blues and yel ows washing across

his screen.

Eva Giles was perched on the edge of her chair, leaning over what looked

like an old-fashioned printer. It was, in fact, a sophisticated piece of

sonar-

recording equipment, its shuttle flying across the scrol ing paper, while also

sending its results to Vlad's hard drive.

'How many is that we've discovered now?' asked Vlad, shouting to be heard

over the thunderous waves battering the side of the ship.

'Counting this one forming off the coast of Wales?' asked Eva. She wore

over-sized black-framed glasses and kept her long brown hair pul ed off her

face. Eva was the crew's science officer who Cash had recruited, at Dana's

request, from the doctoral program in Earth Sciences at the University of

Vancouver. As the crew's youngest and newest recruit, she desperately

wanted to be taken seriously.

'Four significant disturbances,' she final y replied. 'That's a lot in such a short

time. Should we be worried?'

'You're not?' replied Vlad, pul ing up two other sonar maps to his screen.

One was from a hundred miles off the coast of Vietnam, the other from the

ocean south of New Zealand. Vlad quickly scrol ed through a series of

windows until he settled on an oceanic map of the world. Tapping the screen

on the key places where they'd recorded the other deep-water disturbances,

he then dragged the key bits of data and embedded them in each flagged

point.

Grabbing the arm of her chair before it rol ed against the door, Eva watched

Vlad work, knowing some morsel of data, a detail of code, had snagged his

mind as he'd been scrol ing and he was puzzling over what he was seeing. She

watched quietly as he began rubbing his fingers across his short beard, his

green eyes narrowed as he stared intently at the screen. Every few seconds,

he scribbled a note on a sheet of paper, adding to the scraps and piles that

already carpeted his desk. Then he'd twirl his pencil, once, twice, come to a

conclusion and then, using the eraser, double-tap each flag on the screen. In

one swift gesture across his screen, he made the images and the data fly to a

massive electronic map that covered the room's only open wal , each spot on

the map pinging bright within seconds of Vlad's touch on his screen.

'Eva,' said Vlad, nudging her. 'Did you hear anything I just said?'

'No, sorry. What?' Eva could feel herself blush. She'd been thinking about

Vlad's touch. She couldn't help it. He had the most beautiful hands she'd ever

seen in a man. His fingers were long, his nails short, the skin not soft but not

rough either.

‘Eva!’ Vlad shook his head, using two fingers to wipe data over to the wal

map.

‘It’s the storm,’ she said, quickly. ‘I’m a bit… nervous. I’ve never been in a

bad one before.’

Vlad softened his tone. ‘Wel , don’t be. It’s not going to be that bad. Cash

has a tendency towards the drama of a storm, usual y so he can comfort

whatever grad students we have on board.’ Vlad smiled, squeezing Eva’s

shoulder. Heat shot up from her toes to her tummy. Vlad leaned back on his

chair, rubbing his fingers over his lips, concentrating on the data streaming

across his screen.

Then he turned, gripped the arms of Eva’s chair and dragged her to face

him. Leaning into her, Vlad kissed her, his lips soft on her mouth, his tongue

parting them gently. She returned the kiss, her own mouth hungry for his. She

tilted her head back, exposing the pale skin of her neck, letting Vlad’s mouth

trace a line of soft kisses from her lips to her neck, his warm lips, his long

fingers, moving across her bare shoulders, under her sweater to her hardening

nipples. Without shifting him, Eva reached up and loosened her hair, then

grabbing a handful of his, she guided him to her lap.

‘Jesus, look out!’ said Vlad, lunging over Eva to catch a heavy nautical

compass tipping from the shelf before the storm crashed it on top of her.

‘Are you OK?’ he asked, stil leaning over her.

Eva was most definitely not OK. Vlad’s scent was intoxicating. ‘I’m fine.

Real y.’

She wanted to grab his shoulders and jump his bones, no, not jump him, nail

him, screw him, fuck him right here on the cold, hard floor. Eva squeezed her

nails into her palms, shocked at her thoughts. She shoved Vlad out of her way

and stood up. Forgetting to brace herself against the ship’s angry rol s, her

chair slammed against the back of her legs and she toppled into Vlad’s arms.

‘Do you need me to strap you down?’ he laughed.

Oh, God, yes, she thought.

‘I’m sorry. Sorry,’ she said, stepping out of his way. ‘Stil developing my sea

legs.’

‘Wel , make it fast,’ he said, sliding her chair back to her desk and setting

the compass inside one of the metal storage lockers in the room. ‘Because I

need you—’

A soft moan burst from Eva’s lips. Vlad looked at her, quizzical y. ‘Are you

sure you’re OK? You look flushed.’

‘I do feel hot,’ she said, then quickly added, ‘I mean warm… warm.’

‘OK,’ said Vlad, thinking that this was why he preferred working alone. Vlad

had raised a force field around his heart years ago. He was personable, polite

and participated in the crew’s card games and movie watching, but he

perceived his fel ow shipmates as nothing more than sophisticated computers,

hard-wired to behave in certain ways. They were necessary to the job at hand

but immaterial to his personal development.

Vlad had accepted the position as analyst on the *Ice Maiden* after much of

the funding for his research on deep-water morphic fields had dried up when

his mentor at the University of Prague had disappeared with most of the

funding. Vlad’s passion for the oceans and his insane knowledge of computers

were currently running in second and third place to the growing resentment

towards the man who’d stripped him of his future.

‘If you think you can stay focused long enough,’ said Vlad, standing in front

of the wal map and reading some of the information he’d just posted, ‘can you

run a cross-check of the data from the Paracel Islands with this recent deep-

water event off the coast of Wales?'

'Why?' said Eva, trying not to stare at his ass or at the way his faded jeans

sat on the muscular curve of his hips, a thin scar set in the hol ow above his

pelvic bone. Or how his hair curled over the frayed top of his Ziggy Stardust

T-shirt.

'Have you got something?' she asked. Oh, you do, she thought, you real y

do and I want it. Good grief, what was happening to her? Horny didn't begin to

describe these feelings.

She turned back to her computer, the pulsing plot points on the map

mimicking her racing heartbeat. Eva knew when she had signed up for this job

that spending months at sea would mean giving up certain things she enjoyed

– a lot. Shopping for cheap couture, eating fresh fruit, running outside on solid

ground with unsalted air in her hair, and regular pleasurable sex with one or

two of her on-again off-again boyfriends. But until this moment in the middle of

the coldest waters she'd travel ed, she'd never felt such desire, such intense

sexual hunger coursing through her veins, racing to every organ at warp

speed.

‘Eva, real y,’ interrupted Vlad, his patience wearing thin. ‘Focus. I think we

have a serious problem.’

‘What?’ said Eva, using al her wil power to not look at Vlad below the neck.

‘How quickly is the disturbance in Wales growing?’ Vlad asked, standing

over her to get a closer look at the echogram.

Vlad smel ed of Ivory soap and the scent set off a peculiar but not

unpleasant ringing in her ears. When he reached across to highlight a point on

the graph, her body tingled al over, every muscle vibrating like a mil ion hands

on her at once. She crossed her legs and leaned forward, her pulse

quickening again, the ringing clanging in her head. Suddenly she could taste a

burst of peppermint on her tongue.

She sighed. Christ, she felt real y good.

‘That was weird,’ said Eva, grinning up at Vlad. ‘I mean it’s weird… the

events… they’re weird…’ His eyes narrowed. She charged on. ‘I mean they

both displayed signs of a tremor, but neither area is close to any traditional

plate boundaries or fault lines. And now there’s a deep water geyser forming

in each site.’

She pushed away from the desk and Vlad, stepping over to the world

map

secured on the wal . She needed to see the entire scope of their travels

plotted on the map, and she was also afraid of what might happen again if she

didn't get some distance between her body and Vlad's.

The peppermint lingered on her lips, tasting pretty sweet.

'OK,' she said, gathering some professional composure, but keeping her

back to Vlad to be safe. 'Let's look at what we have. Al the waters we've

trawled have experienced some kind of seismic disturbance since Tuesday,

none of them are on traditional fault lines, and so far, thankful y, none of them

have created any major tsunamis or any obvious disturbances on land for that

matter. Yet. But who knows what can happen if they continue to strengthen.'

She took off her glasses, and squinted at the map. 'Did you see that?'

'See what?' said Vlad, his eyes stil on his computer screen where he'd

cal ed up an imaging model of the Norwegian waters they'd just finished

trawling. Pushing his hair from his eyes, he watched his projection image

rotate on the screen, the same points of Eva's map highlighted on his. He

froze the map, and final y turned to Eva. 'Sorry. Say again.'

Eva rubbed her eyes and put her glasses back on. 'It's nothing,' she said, 'I

thought I saw the lights on the map flash in an odd way.'

'I think you may need some rest,' said Vlad. 'We've al been working odd

hours recently. I can cover if you want to go and lie down.'

And then it happened again.

In her peripheral vision, she could see the lights on the southern hemisphere

of the map burst into light at the same time, flashing a regular rhythm, which

was odd because each light was recording a different deep sea disturbance.

There was no possible geological way that each one of those events,

thousands of miles apart, were syncing with each other.

It must be a glitch in their deep-water recorder. Had to be.

32

THE STORM WAS sending the ship into barrel rol s, and Cash had hit the lockdown

alert for the second time. If that happened a third time, they'd have to strap on

their lifejackets, gather the flares and prepare for the worst.

This time walking skilful y against the ship's barrel motion, Eva unlocked a

ceiling-high storage locker, took out a camera and a tripod and set them up

facing the wal map.

'What's going on?' Vlad asked, watching Eva keying in a series of

commands into her iPad to control the camera's time-release.

'Not sure, yet,' she replied, staring again at the pulsing lights on the

maps

where they'd recorded recent seismic disturbances. 'Going with a hunch.

Trying some low-tech recording.'

'OK…' said Vlad, curious about Eva's hunches, but not interested enough to

push for an explanation. Instead, he returned to his own screen. 'Not one of

these deep-water crevices has ever recorded eruptions of this magnitude

before with the exception of this last one we recorded this morning,' he said,

zooming in on the ocean off the southern coast of Peru.

Eva was stil staring at her wal map, which had red lights flashing in the

same places as Vlad was marking on his computer image: one, their most

recent, off the coast of South Wales, one close to the southern tip of New

Zealand, one north of Scotland and not far from their current position, and now

the latest light off the southern coast of Peru.

'The southern coast of Peru,' added Vlad, 'has had significant destructive

quakes and volcanic eruptions that have been getting worse for decades,

especial y since the 1920s and 1930s.'

Eva stared at Peru on the wal map, twisting her hair in concentration while

she spoke. 'I remember when the one in 2007 happened, but the worst

quake

that area ever had was in 1930.'

While Vlad was listening to Eva, he initiated a statistical program he'd

written. When it was loaded, he dumped their data into it.

'I did one of my first field studies on a high archaeological dig in the

Peruvian Andes,' continued Eva, glad to have the memories take her mind off

Vlad. 'The elders in the local vil ages stil talk about the 1930 eruption.

According to their stories, the tremors and eruptions were so powerful that an

entire mountain top dropped into the ocean. I can't remember the name, but—'

'We've seen deep-water eruptions and tremors before,' said Vlad, cutting

her off. As much as he appreciated Eva's geological skil s, he was not quite as

impressed with her need to over-explain everything. 'But not like these ones.

Look at the way this one in Wales is shifting and spreading.'

'I know. Never this deep and never in these areas.' Eva slid her glasses up

on top of her head and rubbed her eyes.

'Eva, we're talking trenches running seven, eight miles deep in the ocean

that are emitting sonar waves equal to 7 on the Richter scale. Most of Asia

and the west coast of the USA should have been hit by a tsunami by now. It's

as if the ocean is not letting that happen. It's keeping these tremors

contained

for some reason.'

Vlad tilted back on his chair, hooking his leg round the table to stop it from

sliding against the wal , while keeping his eyes on his computer as it tracked

the statistical program running at ful speed. No matter how disparate or how

unusual these deep-water events, this program would help the *Ice Maiden* see

what was toiling in the darkest depths of the world's oceans.

'I think we should report these findings,' said Vlad.

'But what do we have to report?'

'A pattern of deep water eruptions,' said Vlad, watching Eva stare at the

map through the lens of her camera. ‘Isn’t that what we’ve been tasked to

monitor?’

‘True. It’s definitely a pattern, but what the pattern means? I’ve no clue,’

replied Eva, making no eye contact at al with Vlad. ‘And do we real y know

what we’ve been tasked to do? I mean we never get a straight answer from

Cash, and if Dana knows, Cash has her so… so smitten, she’s not going to tel

us anything.’

Laughing, Vlad glanced over at Eva. ‘Smitten. Real y? Is that the word in

Vancouver?’

Eva blushed. Again. ‘You know what I mean. If Dana knows anything she’s

not going to share unless Cash gives her permission.’

‘That makes her loyal,’ said Vlad. ‘Not… smitten. But I get your point.’

Eva went back to her computer and began inputting data streams coming

from the echogram. ‘Give me a few more days. We can run through al the

data with Shel ey. Maybe then we’l have something more substantial to share.’

‘I stil think we should let Cash know we’ve got something now, no matter

how tentative. It may change our course,’ said Vlad.

‘But we’ve had so many false alarms recently. I don’t think Cash wants

the

boss, whoever that is, to see us crying wolf again.' Eva tore the printout from

the machine. 'I think Cash knows better than any of us what should be

reported and what shouldn't. Let's let him decide.'

'Which, as you keep pointing out, isn't saying much,' said Vlad, sliding back

across to his station, retrieving his book that had slid off the table to the floor.

Vlad was flipping through the pages to find his place when a massive wave

battered the ship, tipping the vessel onto its side and then back upright again

in a matter of seconds. The force of the rol sent Vlad and his chair flying into

the map wal and Eva and her chair crashing against the open door. Vlad's

computer alarm went off at the same time. He scrambled from his upturned

chair to check on it.

Cash came across the passageway from the mess, sticking his head into

the room. 'Everyone OK in here?'

Vlad stared wide-eyed at his beeping computer. 'Not real y. I think you'd

better take a look at this.'

Helping Eva up off the floor first, Cash joined Vlad at his computer,

anchoring one foot against the desk leg and the other against the cusp of the

steel wal . The ship's rocking was getting worse. Vlad's computer alarm

continued to wail.

'Can you turn that bloody noise off?' said Cash.

Vlad stopped the alarm, watching in shock as a mass of code rol ed across

his screen.

'What am I looking at?' asked Cash.

Vlad made a few fast keystrokes, glanced at Eva and then looked up at

Cash. 'I think we're under attack.'

'What do you mean "under attack"?' asked Cash. 'We're miles from

anything, in the middle of the North Sea.'

'We're being cyber-bombed,' said Vlad.

'We can't be,' said Eva, righting her chair, and wheeling it next to Vlad, fear

completely overriding her desire. The *Ice Maiden* dipped into another massive

wave. Water thrashed against the room's two portals, the ship tipping violently

on its side again. This time Eva and Vlad crashed against the wal on top of

each other.

'But it's impossible,' Eva said, shoving Vlad out of her way and struggling

back to her computer. Cash had managed to remain standing, his legs bracing

him in place. 'Vlad created an impenetrable system. No way someone's

hacking us.'

'I thought so too,' said Vlad, back at his terminal, his fingers flying across

the keyboard, 'but someone's definitely in our system. I know my own code

and this isn't mine.' He leaned closer. 'It's elegant, but it's not mine.'

'Nothing's a hundred per cent secure,' said Cash, not sure what he was

staring at, but trusting Vlad enough to believe his assessment. 'No one in our

line of work would expect it ever to be that way.'

For a moment, Eva wanted to ask if someone would please tel her exactly

what was their line of work, what they were real y looking for in the deepest

parts of the world's oceans, but she didn't. Instead, she sat at her desk and

started keying almost as fast as Vlad, working her way into the core of the

system, trying to catch their hacker before he or she pul ed out.

'I've faith in the two of you,' said Cash, turning to leave as the boat dipped

and rol ed once again. This time they heard a thunderous crash from above as

something on the main deck broke loose of its moorings.

'Finn,' yel ed Cash. 'What the hel was that?'

A voice from the passageway screamed back. 'I'm on it, boss!'

Dana burst in. 'What's going on?'

Hol is came in behind her – the tight space was suddenly packed with

bodies.

‘Partaay in here?’ asked Hol is.

‘We’ve got a mole crawling around in our system,’ said Cash. Turning back

to Vlad, he said, ‘You’l figure it out. Let me know when you do.’

Cash and Dana were about to leave. Eva grabbed Cash’s arm.

‘You don’t understand, Cash. We can’t have a mole. This boat isn’t like your

house or your office. It isn’t cabled to the internet or wired to a server

somewhere. We have our own satel ite uplink.’ She looked over at Vlad, noting

the worry that was furrowing his brow. He was chasing code across his

screen, the lines scrol ing past his eyes at lightning speed.

Cash and the others simply looked confused. They should be worried, Eva

thought. Very worried.

‘Think of this boat as a massive computer server,’ she explained. ‘We’re

only connected to the rest of the internet when the satel ite is up. And Finn

locked it down when the storm began.’

‘Oh,’ said Dana, after a beat.

‘Shit,’ said Cash.

‘Wel , I must be dumber than a plate of snails,’ said Hol is, ‘cause I stil don’t

get it.’

‘If we’re not connected to the internet,’ said Sam, who’d been listening

from

the passageway, ‘and we haven’t been since this storm began, then how can

an outsider be active inside our system right now?’

‘Wel ,’ said Hol is, ‘maybe he snuck in before the storm.’

‘Maybe,’ said Vlad. ‘But I’m getting paid a healthy amount of money to make

sure that doesn’t happen and I don’t think it did. My traps would have snared it

right away. And if it was a Trojan, it wouldn’t be trawling live. It would wait until

we were wired up before activating and sending its data.’

As if on cue, the alarm on his computer began beeping again. Then a beat

later, across the passageway, the television clicked on, the crowd at the

footbal game cheering ‘goal’, the commentators screaming. The echogram

Eva had been monitoring whirred back and forth angrily and the lights on the

ship began to flash.

Before anyone could react to the crazy electrical surge, another wave

smashed against the ship, flipping it almost 180 degrees. Eva screamed and

was thrown into Hol is who crashed against the portal. Cash and Vlad tried to

brace themselves against each other and the heavy metal desk. Then one of

the equipment storage containers popped its moorings and slammed against

the opposite wal , knocking a steel shelf loose above Dana's head. Cash

charged her, knocking both of them clear seconds before the shelf stabbed

into the chair on which Dana had been kneeling. Cash pul ed Dana off the

floor, holding her close for a second longer than was necessary.

Hol is helped Eva back to her seat. Each of them with the exception of Eva

had survived more than their share of rough seas, but this was getting pretty

bad.

At that moment, gripping the sides of the door jamb, Finn stuck his head into

the room. 'Cash, everything's secure on deck. We should be able to ride this

out. Byron's at the wheel.' He looked at the rest of his shipmates who were

pale, shaken and staring back at him. 'What?'

'Is the satel ite stil down?' asked Vlad, ignoring the storm's violence.

Without looking up from his keyboard, despite the broken pieces of equipment

that had landed on his desk, he was stil chasing their intruder.

Finn looked from Vlad to Cash. 'Yes, sir. First thing we did, and we've not

touched it since. If we need to send a… a signal…' Finn was far too

superstitious to even think about the possibility of distress never mind saying

the word aloud, 'the radios wil work from the emergency gen—'

The lights went out.

Everything had shut down – the alarms, the lights, the television, and, worst

of al , the engines.

The *Ice Maiden* was dead in the water.

‘What the hel ’s going on?’ demanded Cash, careening off the wal s as he

and Sam struggled out of the research lab to the passage, which was not

wide enough for two men to pass. ‘Finn, with Sam and me.’

They stood behind him while he unlocked a storage locker under the ladder

with keys hooked on his belt. He lifted out two torches and a gun.

‘We may have been hit by a rogue wave,’ he said, handing the torches to

Finn and Sam. Steadying himself against the sides of the passageway, he

snapped a ful clip into the gun, adding, ‘But we may have been hit by

something else.’

‘Doesn’t real y matter what hit us,’ said Sam, leading the way to the engine

room. ‘If we can’t get the engines back on… in this storm… we’l al be

swimming soon.’

Sam, Finn and Cash cautiously made their way along the tight passage to

the engine room, leaving the rest in the dark lab.

Eva was shifting containers to get at a box with emergency lights, which she

handed to Hol is who took the lights and strung them across the ceiling. While

she was attaching the battery pack, a whirring mechanical noise cut into the

screaming wind and the thundering waves pounding into the paralysed trawler.

Eva shifted a steel drawer out of her way. ‘It’s the teletype. How is that

working without electricity?’

The message printed in lower case was an unusual combination of letters

and phrases. Eva tore the sheet from the machine when it stopped.

Bracing himself against the door, Hol is looked over Eva’s shoulder at the

sheet. ‘Is that some kind of code?’ he asked.

‘No, darlin’,’ Eva said, mimicking Hol is’s Cajun accent. ‘It’s Welsh.’

Gwen

33

TWO DAYS AFTER the supermarket incident, most local media outlets were

reporting a wave of violent outbursts by women in cinemas, libraries and

shops, particularly in rural and secluded parts of the UK. But as the madness

appeared to be spreading among smal random clusters of woman and no one

else – no men and no children – parts of the national press began speculating

that these women might be experiencing a kind of mass female hysteria.

One local GP from Cornwal was quoted as saying these women were

trying to ‘have it al ’ and, as a result, they were ‘cracking under the pressure’.

He cal ed it ‘Multi-Tasking Madness’, encouraged women to stay at home

more, to avoid stress and too much over-stimulation.

The backlash was immediate. Soon the media was less interested in the

newest cases breaking out in the UK and instead focused on the debate over

the feminist and political ramifications of the madness.

Social media muted whatever rising panic was happening among its female

fol owers and responded to the events with black humour and ironic mockery.

At the end of day two, the most popular trending topics on Twitter were

#realfemmefatales and #nolongerontheverge.

Jack sat at the kitchen table, a laptop open in front of him, scanning reports

from the World Health Organization, the International Organization for

Women’s Wel being, Doctors Without Borders and as many international news

agencies as he could access.

He scrol ed through masses of text, his brain grabbing any repetition of

details, slivers of conversations, similarities in descriptions, suggestions and

al usions, anything he could discern, no matter how trivial and

irrelevant, that

might suggest a pattern. Anyone watching him, his body stock stil , the

occasional shifting of his eyes as lines of text whipped past him, would have

thought he was in a trance.

He wasn't sure where his eidetic memory had come from but, for as long as

he could remember, Jack had been able to store huge amounts of data in

patterns and images.

While he was reading, he noticed that with certain websites, the yel ow dots

he'd seen earlier in his peripheral vision had returned. He did his best to ignore

them, especial y when they shifted colour the more quickly he scanned.

On day three, the 'masochistic madness', as a blogger had label ed it, was

being reported international y; the numbers of women experiencing symptoms

of violent mental breakdowns were being registered in six or seven secluded

regions across the world. From the highlands of Scotland to the island of

Rakiura off the southern tip of New Zealand, women living continents apart

were committing random acts of violence towards themselves, their families,

their neighbours and their communities.

Thousands of women worldwide had descended into a kind of madness that

even the most highly trained psychiatrists and experienced neurologists were

having difficulty diagnosing. The only thing the medical community knew with

any certainty was that this increase in mental il ness involved a breakdown of

each woman's physical senses, a mangling of what she was feeling, seeing,

smel ing, and even tasting.

Jack made a few more notes, sent a couple more emails, and made a

secure phone cal . While Gwen was stil in the psychiatric ward, Jack had

settled into relative domesticity with Mary, Rhys and Anwen. He knew it

couldn't last, but as long as he was trying to make sense of what had

happened to Gwen and these other women, Wales was as good a place as

any from which to investigate the phenomenon.

Mary had taken Anwen for a walk in town. The house was quiet. Jack

scanned the reports he'd hacked into from the World Health Organization,

which had become a clearing house of data from the various medical

communities dealing with these afflicted women.

According to the recent reports, no two women reacted the same way when

the madness descended upon them: some col apsed from an overwhelming

sense of smel ; others felt as if the volume in their surroundings had been

cranked too high; a few tasted emotions so strongly they were physical y il ;

even more reported that they hal ucinated realities they could never have

experienced and heard imagined music and disembodied voices.

After three hours of reading, Jack closed the laptop, got up from the table

and, lifting his coat and binoculars from behind the kitchen door, went out to

stretch his legs and to think. Outside, he could smel the coming rain… and

something else – wood smoke, sulphur and the stink of hot tar. It was mid-

afternoon on a cold, dreary Wednesday. He was alone in the street.

He could sense a strange tang in the air. The vaguely ruddy scent of blood

and rust drifted towards him, leading him south, towards the seafront. By the

time he reached the Marina, the rain was fal ing in heavy, lashing drops and

the smel was stronger, as pungent as perfume. It felt ominous. He turned up

his col ar and hooked his binoculars over his shoulder. While he walked, he

became aware of the silence around him. He could hear the rush of the sea,

the rain dripping from his upturned coat col ar down onto his neck, but that

was al .

Jack lifted his binoculars to the horizon, scanning the five or six miles of

beach to his right. He held his gaze for one, two, three beats, and then he

shifted his focus to the Maritime Quarter behind him.

No cormorants. No sandpipers. No gul s. No magpies. No birds of any

species anywhere. Jack was not a suspicious man, but he couldn't help

thinking that this was not a good sign.

As Jack was walking across the soft sand, he felt the beach shift beneath

him, throwing him off-balance. He recovered his footing and turned back the

way he had come, the tremor worsening.

Suddenly, car sirens blasted from the street beyond the promenade, and he

saw a smal explosion from a passing car, an exhaust pipe popping. As the

ground shook, the car shot off the road, somehow soaring over the low

promenade wal , diving nose-first into the sand below.

The tremor stopped. But Jack was stil reeling, his nostrils ful of the stench

of burning tyres and hot macadam. He took a couple of strides towards the

car, knowing he should help, but the smel clogged his sinuses, and he

retched, unable to clear it. He staggered back, breaking into a run, the smel

clashing with a nightmarishly amplified ringing of alarms. For Jack Harkness, a

man who had leapt into burning buildings and in front of alien war machines, it

was al suddenly too much.

Jack ran away.

*

Breathless, bewildered and furious with himself, Jack took off his boots and

hung his coat to dry in the kitchen. He put the kettle on, then went to the

bathroom and found a towel to dry his hair, which was longer than it had ever

been. For some reason, he had very little desire to cut it. He looked at himself

in the bathroom mirror, aware, again, of that peripheral vision of yel ow dots.

As he stared into the mirror, the dots slowly moved front and centre and

began to coalesce. The face of a young woman appeared, floating in front of

his own. She had black eyes and thick dark hair flooding over her shoulders.

Jack pressed his hand on the mirror, touching her image. He breathed out

slowly.

What the hel was that?

Who the hel was that?

34

MINUTES LATER, JACK stood in the kitchen, waiting for the kettle to boil and staring

at a hurried drawing he'd made of the woman's image.

He had no idea who she was. Not a clue. This ignorance, this lack of

knowing, this gap in his understanding was as unsettling to Jack as any of the

extraordinary and alien experiences he'd ever had. She'd felt real to him, not a

hal ucination. Setting the pad down on the table, he stared out into the eerily

empty street, watching two local constables cycling down the road,

presumably checking for casualties from the minor quake.

Flipping open his laptop, Jack checked the weather channel. The

earthquake had been recorded at 3.4 on the Richter scale. BBC Wales was

reporting most of the damage had been to the sea ports and vil ages on the

south-eastern coast.

Jack noted the data scrol ing across his computer and the pages and pages

of information about the deranged women spread out across the table. He

sighed, lamenting how much he missed his team, missed Owen and Tosh,

missed the Hub and its battery of computers.

The kettle whistled on the counter behind him. He didn't move, letting it build

up its steam, missing Ianto most of al .

'I hate doing this shit by myself.'

Coffee in hand, Jack sat down and carried on.

So far, Jack had found nothing of significance, other than the fact that the

affected were al women. He was certain this was a critical point, but stil

couldn't see an angle to pursue that might suggest a solution to diminish or

stop the outbreaks, never mind understanding the cause.

Jack sat back in the kitchen chair, sipping his coffee. Ianto would have

brought him a biscuit or two.

In his head, Jack flipped through the files of the local women who'd been

affected at the same time as Gwen. These women were a good sample of al

those who'd been struck. If he could understand the cause – because there

was a cause, he thought. This was not random. This was not some kind of

mass female hysteria. Jack had lived through far too much to believe for one

second there wasn't something or someone behind what was happening.

It wasn't until day five that Jack witnessed something that was the

breakthrough for which he'd been searching, the understanding that might help

him bring Gwen home.

*

Jack was stretched across the couch in the living room reading to Anwen.

Rhys had gone to fetch Mary from the hospital and bring her home for tea.

Gwen and the other women remained sedated and mostly incoherent, their

families taking turns sitting watch al day at their bedsides, vigils that were

occurring al over the world where clusters of women had been afflicted.

‘No,’ said Anwen as Jack opened the colourful new alphabet book he’d

bought for her. She turned to the bright red apple on the first page with a

speckled worm crawling through its core carrying a bag of books.

‘A is for Apple,’ said Jack.

‘No,’ said Anwen, slapping the picture of the apple.

‘Oh, I’m pretty sure that A is for Apple,’ laughed Jack, ‘at least in this

universe.’

Anwen grabbed the book from Jack and began to flip through the pages

until she reached L where there was a picture of a large luscious lemon with

striped straws sticking out al over it. She poked her finger at the lemon and

said, ‘Apple.’

No matter how insistent Jack was, Anwen was unyielding.

He carried her into the kitchen and showed her the fruit bowl. ‘Anwen, show

Uncle Jack the apple.’

He held her forward and she picked up the only apple left in the bowl. He

peeled it and cut it into slices, and they shared the snack, while he thought

things through.

Later at dinner, he told Rhys and Mary what had happened.

‘She recognises the shapes,’ he told them. ‘So what was confusing her? Do

you think she might be colour blind?’

Mary was clearing the table, stacking the dishes in the sink. ‘I don’t think

she is. She has no problem pointing out colours in her rainbow book.’

‘That’s what I thought,’ said Jack, fil ing the sink with water and suds to

wash the dishes. ‘No worries. Maybe she was just mixed up.’

When the house was quiet and everyone asleep, Jack tiptoed downstairs

and sat at the dining room table. In the pale moonlight beaming through the

windows, he sorted al the information he had gathered, including the image of

the women in the mirror, into a narrative of sorts.

By the time the sun came up, Jack believed he had hit on something, and it

unsettled him.

35

THE SECURITY GUARD on duty outside the locked ward had been eyeing Jack

suspiciously since coming on duty at the shift change. He instinctively deferred

to a senior officer, but this man’s uniform looked oddly old-fashioned – as if

he’d stepped out of a vintage comic book. ‘You’re the kind of man me

mam

warned me of,' the guard muttered to himself.

Now the man was violating the locked ward's protocols. Looked like he was

going to break into the ward with al those nutty women. Before the guard

could cal for assistance, Jack returned to the desk and handed over his

belongings, including his coat, a leather wrist-strap, his passport, and his

phone al of which the guard looked at quizzical y before dropping into a Ziploc

bag. Once Jack had signed the visitors' log, the guard buzzed him into the

ward.

'Keep your voice low, your head high and your hands where I can see them

at al times. D'ya hear?'

Jack saluted. 'Loud and clear.'

Pausing at the door, Jack was overwhelmed with the sharp pine scent of

antiseptic, the metal ic odour of blood, the heavy breathing and the quiet

moaning of the patients invading his senses at once. His fingertips began

tingling. He stared down at his hands. He opened and closed his fists, but this

served only to spread the stinging to his knuckles where he felt a dul throb.

When he looked up, three fiery interlocking red rings shimmered before his

eyes. Jack stared over at Gwen quietly moaning in bed below a high barred

window. The rings were identical to the image she'd carved on her arm. Jack

exhaled slowly. The rings floated in front of his field of vision, bouncing like an

animated 3D image on an invisible screen inches from his face. He glanced

from Gwen to each of the other women in the ward. The rings fol owed his line

of sight.

Jack took a deep breath, reaching his hand up to touch one of them. The

image danced in front of his hand. No matter what Jack did, the rings

remained between him and whatever he was looking at.

'Oi. What's going on in there?' asked the guard, his voice crackling through

the intercom.

Jack turned and waved at the guard. The rings disappeared.

Jack raked his hands through his hair, knowing that he had been lying to

himself and he had been for weeks. Exhaustion, loneliness, blood-letting, the

effects of nearly dying, al those were the lies he'd been using as excuses for

this deepening emotional fragility he was experiencing, for it was a wave of

fear, a tug of intensity and a strange email that had brought him back to Wales

in time to stop Gwen hurting her family.

Jack couldn't explain how his need to help her had been triggered by a

scent on a distant world, the smel lingering from a dream he'd had or a

memory that was seeping back into his consciousness from an age ago. Jack

knew he could no longer ignore the rock-hard bad feeling lodged in his gut that

something troubling was happening on Earth, and that Gwen and al these mad

women were somehow part of it.

The only other visitor in the psychiatric ward was a stocky man in his

thirties, leaning over the woman with one side of her face bandaged. He was

gently brushing a section of his wife's hair, an act so intimate and tender that

Jack averted his eyes for a beat, but the man caught Jack's stare.

'At night when we watch the tel y,' he said, his voice heavy with sadness, 'I

always give 'er hair a brush, like. She says it makes her 'ave good dreams.

Don't know what else to do to make her be stil .' Every few beats his wife

would jump, her arms and legs spasming against the blankets.

'Name's Phil Newman,' he said when the spasm subsided. 'This is my wife,

Lizzie… Elizabeth.'

'My sister,' Jack said, nodding towards Gwen, who was mumbling in her

partial y conscious state, and stil fighting against her restraints. 'I'm

hoping the

sedative settles her soon. I'm afraid I don't have her hairbrush with me.'

'Wel ,' the other man said, 'she's quietened down from when she first came

in a few days ago.' He set the brush on the bedside table. 'Did your sister hurt

herself too? My Lizzie tore off her own ear. Can you believe that?'

He slumped into the chair next to his wife's bed, looking up at Jack with his

eyes swol en and sad. 'How does someone do that to themselves? What must

be goin' on in her head?'

Jack came over and stood at the bottom of Lizzie's bed. 'I'm sure the

doctors here wil figure out what happened to your wife and to these other

women. This hospital has one of the best neurological and psychiatric teams in

the British Isles.'

'That's grand,' said the husband mournful y, 'but they can't heal her ear, can

they?'

'Do you mind if I ask you a couple of questions?' asked Jack. 'I'm trying to

figure out what happened to my sister and I think it may be the same thing

that happened to your wife.'

'Real y?' said Phil, sceptical y. 'The doctor told me that whatever had

happened to make her hurt herself had come from inside Lizzie's head

and the

doctor said it weren't contagious.'

'I know, and she is the doctor, but I'm curious anyway.'

Across the room one of the other women began spasming. No sooner had

she started than Gwen's body began to jerk and then Lizzie's, their legs and

arms twitching beneath the blankets. As if their movements had been

choreographed, each of the women were spasming in unison.

Lizzie's husband jumped up and began to brush her hair again, believing his

touch was making al the difference when his wife settled after a few strokes.

Jack held his hands on Gwen's feet, keeping her movements limited. He

was not so sure his touch or Phil's had anything to do with what he was

suddenly witnessing, as each of the women came out of the spasms at the

same.

The rock-hard bad feeling yawned in Jack's gut.

'Did your wife have a history of taking drugs, Phil?' asked Jack, coming

back to Lizzie's bedside while keeping his eye on Gwen. 'Even if it was only at

col ege or in her younger days?'

Phil stopped brushing for a second. 'Nah. Lizzie was always the straight

one, hardly even took a drink, did she. She was always the one who

took the

car keys when we were out with our friends. Always the mum of the group,

making sure the rest of us were right as rain.'

'What about an emotional trauma in childhood?'

Phil shook his head.

'An accident of some kind?'

'The doctor wondered 'bout that too. But my wife's as healthy as an ox.

Only time she's ever been in hospital before now was to have the kids. When

she's feeling out of sorts, she goes for a night out wi' her pals, shakes it off,

like. She just got our youngest toilet trained and she were so happy not to be

doin' nappies any more.'

Phil's voice caught in his throat. Jack poured him a glass of water from the

pitcher on the bedside table. 'Don't know what I'm goin' to tel the kids 'bout

this.'

'You'l think of something, Phil,' Jack handed him the water. 'Do you know

when her breakdown started exactly?'

'Was right after lunch four days ago. I'm sure of it. My 9-year-old cal ed me

at work and said mum had run out of the house. By the time I got home, police

were already there and said she was in emergency. Said that she'd had

some

kind of a fit in the shop.'

Across the room, Gwen let out a high-pitched moan. 'Shewvee, Shewvee,

Shewvee.'

Jack wanted to ask Phil more questions before the doctor returned and

before Mary relieved him, but Gwen was becoming extremely agitated again.

Suddenly al the women were.

Jack wished Phil the best of luck and pul ed a chair up to the right side of

Gwen's bed. He took her hand. The leather restraint on her wrist was lined

with cotton, but because Gwen had been fighting against it, her skin

underneath the strap's edge was rubbed raw.

Jack dug around in Gwen's bedside locker and found some Vaseline.

Scooping some out with a finger, he massaged the ointment into her wounds.

Slowly, she turned her head at his touch. Jack smiled and leaned closer.

Gwen was crying.

'Jack?'

He smiled, fighting back his own tears. 'How are you feeling?'

'Jack?'

'Yes. It's me.'

She strained to lift herself up, but she couldn't. Too much pain, too many

monitors, too little strength, too tight restraints.

Jack put his hands on her shoulders, settling her gently against the pil ows.

‘Shewvee,’ she slurred, adamantly.

‘Gwen, I’m so sorry. I don’t understand what you’re trying to tel me.’

‘Esh,’ she said, her eyes blazing, her determination fighting against the

deepening sedative.

‘S?’ asked Jack, taking her hand again. She squeezed.

‘Shoe. Shoe.’

‘U?’ Gwen squeezed his hand again, but her grip was weakening. The

sedative pul ing her under.

‘Gwen, that’s great. The letters S and U.’

‘Wee… wee,’ she whimpered, and then her eyes drooped closed, her mouth

slackened, her grip on Jack’s hand loosened and Gwen was silent and stil for

the first time in days.

Jack final y understood what she’d been struggling to tel him. Kissing her

lightly on the lips, he whispered, ‘Come back, Gwen. Please come back.’

36

JACK STOOD IN the hal way of the house, deep in thought. Gwen had spel ed out

‘SUV’, but she had drifted into sleep before tel ing him where she had hidden

the keys, never mind the vehicle itself.

She wouldn’t have been sloppy in her hiding place because she

wouldn’t

want Rhys to find them, to know that she had a way to get in touch with him.

Hiding them in plain sight would not be an option. Besides al the household’s

keys were on hooks in the kitchen, an extra set would be easily noticed.

Since returning to the house, Jack had already rifled through drawers,

cupboards and Gwen’s empty gun locker, the firearms confiscated by the

police when she’d attacked Rhys.

He had gone down into the basement and rummaged through boxes of

Christmas decorations, old Hal oween costumes, discarded wedding gifts and

old bikes. He’d taken apart toilet cisterns, lifted floorboards, and cut into wal s.

He stil had not found the key fob. Jack knew he didn’t have much time to keep

looking, expecting that Rhys would be home with Anwen soon after taking

Mary to the hospital.

Jack scanned the papered wal s in the hal way, thinking that perhaps he’d

missed a safe hidden underneath one of the pictures, but he doubted it. Then

he spotted a splash of colour under the bed in Gwen and Rhys’s room.

Reaching underneath, Jack retrieved a book: *The Day of the Triffids* . Jack

skimmed the back cover, reading that the book was a post-apocalyptic novel

(not Jack's favourite genre, but clearly Gwen's or Rhys's), where a

catastrophic event has left a few surviving humans blind while giant man-eating

plants with poisonous stingers walk the earth. Jack knew al about *them* – a

nasty species.

The book was old, its faded yel ow cover stained and smel ing faintly of

cigarettes. Jack opened it, discovering its pages hol owed out and Gwen's

dad's watch and wedding ring inside. Jack began tossing books from the

shelves next to the window. Ten minutes later he found the Torchwood SUV's

key fob hidden in a hardback copy of *Brave New World* . After another twenty

minutes, he'd discovered the wrecked vehicle hidden in the nearby lock-up.

Clicking twice on the key, Jack opened the vehicle's hatch and the wave of

images and smel s that assaulted his senses took him to his knees. Oranges

and lilies and musk. He could see the team clambering into the vehicle and

racing out to the Brecon Beacons, or speeding through the narrow backstreets

of Cardiff. Tosh in the backseat, working on her laptop, Owen mocking her

mercilessly, Gwen mocking Owen, and Ianto, dear sweet Ianto, taking care of

them al . Jack leaned back on his heels and closed his eyes. Ianto

touched his

cheek, put his lips on Jack's, his hands moving under Jack's shirt.

Jack let out a sob, and opened his eyes.

A flock of starlings swooped over a nearby roof, panicking at something,

darting higher up into the sky. Jack was aware of a rustling sound, close to the

lock-up. He walked back out to the street, peering into the darkness.

A dark sleek puma padded across his line of vision. It stopped, turned its

head and stared directly at him, its black eyes twinkling in the moonlight.

Ginger flooded Jack's mouth. He inhaled slowly, every instinct tel ing him to

get away, to flee, to run, but he couldn't get his feet to move. Jack felt as if he

was being held in place, as if hands were pressing down on his shoulders. His

knees buckled again. The puma pounced. Jack ducked, shielding his head with

his arms, a draft of cold air hitting his face.

When he looked up, the animal was gone. Nauseated, Jack leaned against

a wal , calming his breathing, forcing his mind to clear. A car alarm went off in

the distance. His stomach ached at the sound.

Jack slid to the ground against the wal , struggling to control his mounting

anxiety, his head between his knees. He was fal ing through the sky. The

ground rushed up to meet him, the air cutting through his skin. Jack tried

desperately to tuck into a bal , but his arms and legs wouldn't respond, he

squeezed his eyes closed and felt the rough stone of the wal behind his back.

For the first time in his long life, Jack felt sheer terror beyond anything he'd

experienced when confronting Daleks, or Cybermen, or – No, this kind of

terror was making his bones ache, making his heart feel as if someone was

squeezing and twisting it, making him doubt his sanity.

Jack crawled inside the SUV. The scent of the memory replaced with the

stench of rust and mould and the stink of shit and rotting leaves.

What the hel is happening to me?

What, he wondered as he sat in the corner, his knees against his chest,

what if the Doctor and al his theories about his mortality were wrong. What if

this was how Captain Jack Harkness was going to end his existence. His body

always able to heal itself, reanimate each cel , restructure every muscle, over

and over and over again. Life always winning out within him. Perhaps the price

of regaining his immortality after the Miracle had been the loss of his

memories, his intel igence, his sanity?

Jack knew he could face death. He had faced death. But how could he face

life on those terms?

Jack sat in the shel of the Torchwood SUV and sobbed, letting

hopelessness burrow deeper into his psyche, letting emotions he'd never

experienced in years course through his veins, letting the enemy inside.

Outside the SUV, the puma stalked the perimeter, its head lifted towards

Jack. Then it paused, scratched at the ground around the SUV before fading

into the darkness, leaving the smel of eucalyptus lingering in its wake.

Jack felt the tremor in his hands, an uncontrol able itch on each tip of his

fingers. He clawed his hands across the carpet of the SUV, trying for relief.

The itch spread to his elbows like a mil ion mosquitoes biting him at once. He

scrambled out of the vehicle, rubbing his arms against the wal , scraping and

tearing the skin. Then he felt the ground rol beneath him. The garage wal s

surrounding the SUV began to shake, the corrugated iron door buckling as

dust and dirt rained down on him.

In the distance he heard a chorus of car alarms start as a tremor ran up the

street, ripping up the pavement like paper and scattering trees. One toppled

towards the garage, and Jack threw himself out of its way, his momentum

carrying him on into the road. Except there was no road any more – the

tarmac was fracturing beneath him.

Jack scrabbled to find his footing, but the ground shook around him, ancient

pipes and cable snaking and jumping as the earth buckled. Above him, the little

row of lock-ups was col apsing, their wal s bulging and splitting as the water

mains burst through them. Jack fought his way onto a patch of road, and clung

to it, a tiny island in a gushing torrent of water. He looked up, trying to see a

way to get to the SUV before it was too late, but al he could see was the

ground yawning further open, a vast, muddy canyon gulping down cars,

wheelie bins and benches, bobbing around in a mundane flotil a. He could hear

the cries of other people, could see them running as the crevice zigzagged

further up the street.

Then, with a sudden rol ercoaster jolt, Jack's little island slipped forward,

tipping him into the churning morass, the blocks of concrete landing on his

back, pinning him to the bottom.

Blood pounding in his ears, he tried pushing the blocks off him, but the

weight was too much. Choking and flailing, Jack began to drown.

Then a great boom travel ed through the water, and the surging pool around

Jack became a sudden rushing current, dragging and tugging at his clothes.

The ground had split stil further, pul ing the plug out of the basin and sucking

the water, cars, stonework and flotsam down deep into the ground.

Jack was suddenly grateful for the masonry holding him in place. It was the

only thing keeping him from being carried away. As the last of the water

vanished, the blocks on top of him started to shift, and Jack pul ed himself

coughing to his feet. Al around him was mud, sobbing and devastation. Jack

was standing on the lip of a great chasm. Echoing up from it was the gurgle of

water and the absurd echo of dozens of car alarms.

He tried to get his bearings and groaned. The street was a ruin. Houses

crumpled like they were made of Lego. The lock-ups had gone. And there was

no sign of the car.

The SUV had gone, taking with it whatever Gwen had wanted him to find.

37

MARY COOPER WAS putting on a brave show, handing out strong tea and coffee in

plastic cups, pretending that helping serve refreshments to those cleaning up

the streets was distracting her from worrying about Gwen locked up in that

horrible psychiatric ward.

Her husband's fate had left Mary wary of the authorities and the hospitals.

She was simultaneously terrified of having her daughter in a hospital and

anxious that she wasn't getting the care she needed. The ward was noisy and

sterile, cold and unwelcoming. Al Gwen real y needed was rest, a chance to

recover from everything that she'd been through, flying back and forth across

the Atlantic, trying to save her dad and anyone else that she could, and al so

soon after the birth of a baby. It wasn't surprising that Gwen's mind had

cracked; any normal woman's would have, and way before now.

'Thanks for doing al this, Mary,' said one of the area's local council ors. 'No

matter what anyone thinks, there's stil nothing like a good strong cuppa to

make the job go smoothly.'

Especial y, thought Mary, when al you've done al morning is parade up and

down the streets giving orders, you useless twit.

'Biscuit?' she said to him.

'Don't mind if I do.'

*

The havoc was not confined to the streets. Out in the middle of the channel, a

vast black geyser was shooting steam into the air, creating a grey mist around

it that was keeping the coastguard at a careful distance. When the tremor had

struck last night, the geyser had burst through the water's surface. Now the

sky above was fil ed with helicopters and the surrounding beaches and cliffs

lined with tourists watching the towering fountain.

The wave the geyser had created had hit the corner of the southern coast

of Wales like a freight train, water slamming into the cliffs with enough force to

crumble a hefty chunk of coastline, littering the shore with debris and stabbing

the sand with trees hurled from the cliffs during the quakes.

The Marina was swarming with men and women dressed in yel ow

emergency vests, gripping black bin bags in gloved hands like an army of

giant bees. A squad of local firefighters was tagging the bigger pieces of

debris that were safe to have local lads on three wheelers haul to a central

dumping site and from there on to the city waste yard.

Local schools had been closed for the rest of the week. There had been

injuries, but no deaths, and most of the community was embracing the hard

work ahead of them with a sense of humour and grace.

Most of them, that is, except Andy Davidson, who was trying to weave his

police car in and out of the tides of people flowing up and down the ravaged

Swansea streets. When Andy eventual y pul ed up outside the Coopers' house,

he was jittery and on edge and not looking forward to sharing his news.

'Hey,' he cal ed to Jack and Rhys. The two of them were busy doing

makeshift repairs to the fence. Jack was holding a plank in place while Rhys

hammered it with his good arm. They glanced up as Andy approached. Jack

noticed the blanched look on Andy's face, and made a quick attempt to get

Mary out of the way.

'I could use a cup of that coffee, Mary,' he said.

Gwen's mother remained immune to his charm. 'Wel , Mister Captain Jack

Harkness, you know where the pot is, because if this is about Gwen I'm

hearing it same as you both.' She folded her arms, pursed her lips and waited.

Andy looked from Jack to Rhys and then to Mary. He could hear Bonnie in

his head: 'Look them in the eye and serve them the news. How they take it

isn't up to you to control.'

'Gwen's gone,' Andy blurted out.

'What?' said Rhys.

‘Gone where?’ said Mary, not quite grasping what she was hearing.

‘What happened?’ said Jack, grabbing the hammer from Rhys before he put

it through a window or Andy.

‘It’s standard procedure when the emergency alert system goes off that al

restrained patients have their restraints loosened – you know, in case they

need to escape to a safe environment.’

‘So they just let her walk out of the bloody ward?’ asked Rhys.

‘Let him finish, Rhys,’ said Jack.

‘Al the women in that ward were sedated when their restraints were

removed. The doctor checked. The guards were changing shifts. They

assumed because the women were asleep that they didn’t have to watch them

so careful y. They claim they turned away for only a few minutes, when they

checked the ward, the nurse was knocked out and Gwen was gone. The

guard says it looked like she had pul ed out her IV and must have been faking

that she was getting her sedation.’

‘Did you check the CCTV footage?’ asked Jack.

‘We tracked her to the car park, and then nothing. She must have left during

the tremors,’ said Andy. ‘I’ve got everyone on the lookout. We’l find her.’

Jack and Rhys knew Gwen better than anyone in the world. In unison they

said, ‘I doubt it.’

Mary whirled round to face Jack. ‘I wish she’d never bloody met you!’ she

yel ed.

She dashed inside the house, leaving Jack staring down at Anwen bumping

his leg with her plastic trike.

38

THE MEDIA CLAMOUR had been growing for almost a week. By the time Dr Trimba

Ormond of King’s Col ege, London cal ed an official WHO press conference

about the increasingly frequent cases of female ‘insanity’, it was already too

late.

A few physicians and a smattering of politicians and diplomats representing

various global health institutes and NGOs gathered at the WHO’s London

headquarters. They were talking anxiously among themselves, and general y

avoiding any acknowledgement that they might once again be facing a global

crisis. A few journalists were there, too, but most had decamped to South

Wales in search of super geysers.

Two floors above the lecture hal , Dr Ormond sat in her bright but cramped

office behind an overflowing desk, touching up her make-up while she finished

a cal .

‘I suppose the good thing is that there has been a learning curve of sorts,’

she said, powdering her thin nose. ‘We are certainly much better equipped to

share resources and information among each other than we were a year ago.’

‘That may be the case,’ said the Health Secretary on the other end of the

line. ‘These women might simply be experiencing a reaction to something

they’ve come into contact with, or even some medication they’ve al shared.

And, to be perfectly clear, I’m not dismissing the notion that this is simply

mass hysteria among like-minded women. Let’s be honest, Dr Ormond, we’re

not talking about a real health crisis, are we?’

Dr Ormond smarted at the minister’s remark and angrily snapped her

powder case closed. As far as she was concerned, too many of her

col eagues had been slow to respond to this crisis because it was happening

only to women, and, worse, it was happening inside women’s heads. A far too

scary place to inhabit if you listened to some of these men.

‘As you are wel aware from my report, sir,’ she said, ‘we’ve so far found

nothing in common among these females except that there’s never only one

woman affected. Almost every cluster has at least five or six women in

it. We

have yet to trace only one woman in an area suffering from this mental il ness

alone.'

'So perhaps that might suggest each cluster has something in common.'

Dr Ormond looked up at her assistant who had entered the office and was

tapping his watch face. Three minutes until the press conference.

'As you wil also note in our report,' said Dr Ormond impatiently, gathering

the notes for her speech from her desk and sliding them into her leather

portfolio, 'each woman in each cluster that we've been able to identify has

been thoroughly investigated and we have found no correlation in their

symptoms and nothing at al in common in their backgrounds. We've tested

their ground water and their major food supply, their oxygen levels and their

blood types. We have nothing.'

'But you wil continue to investigate?'

'Of course! But—'

Before she could finish her sentence, before she could present him with her

plan to continue the investigation, the Health Secretary interrupted her and

excused himself. From the speaker, Dr Ormond could hear a mumbled

conversation, raised voices and then she heard chairs scraping. A new

deeper, softer male voice came on the line. ‘Trimba, this is Alan Pride. May we

speak frankly?’

She looked up at her assistant, who shrugged and rol ed his eyes. Alan

Pride was the PM’s right-hand man, his amanuensis, his conscience (such as it

was) and, when necessary, his fal guy. Alan Pride was in his fifties, and a man

of one or two intriguing contradictions. Born to a coalmining family in the north

of England, Pride had earned a scholarship to the London School of

Economics, where he and the PM had become close friends. A Harvard MBA

had been fol owed by rapid progress to the board of an international bank.

When the market crashed, Pride stepped down. Admitting his own bank had

been complicit in making bad loans, he testified in front of Parliament and the

US Congress against many of his fel ow bankers who, he believed, had

shamed themselves and their profession. Sel ing his mansion in Connecticut,

his pied-a-terre in Paris and his house in Kensington, he disappeared from the

public eye for a few months. His appointment in Downing Street had caused a

minor uproar in predictable sections of the press but, as usual, that hadn’t

been enough to outweigh the support of the Party.

Was Pride a changed man or simply a man who'd changed his approach to

power? Trimba Ormond hadn't made up her mind. 'What is it you'd like to ask,

Mr Pride?'

'Do you have a plan for what our local hospitals should do with these women

who are… suffering? Because you know as wel as I do that our mental health

facilities are already stretched to capacity. Before you take any of this report

to the public, I'd like to talk to you about some ideas I have on the matter.'

Dr Ormond sat back down at her desk. 'With al due respect, Mr Pride, I

have a press conference about to start. I think we need to share what we've

discovered right now. Before things get worse.'

'That's not your cal to make, Trimba. I'l see you in my office tomorrow at 9

a.m.'

Dr Ormond slammed her portfolio onto the speaker, disconnecting the cal .

She instructed her assistant to cancel the press conference, but gave no

indication if she was going to reschedule. The press would not be happy, and

neither would her col eagues. She made a few edits on the press release,

then handed it to her assistant.

‘How does that sound?’ she asked.

Her assistant read the release aloud. ‘While we, in col aboration with other

national and regional organisations, have not yet uncovered the cause of this

widespread outbreak of mental il ness in women, we have determined that the

number of cases has not increased dramatical y. We must, however, remind

al care-givers of suffering women that, although it seems not to be

contagious, it can be life-threatening to its sufferers and to their loved ones.

Therefore, until we can find a way to eliminate, or at the very least reduce the

symptoms for these afflicted women, we and our health partners across the

world are recommending that health professionals keep their patients sedated

and under close supervision.’

‘Appropriately informative and necessarily vague,’ he said when he’d

finished.

‘Perfect.’

39

RHYS WAS SLUMPED at the Coopers’ kitchen table, a half-finished beer next to

him. His wrist was in a cast, his eyes red-rimmed, his left one circled in

purples and yel ows. Panic and worry were the only things keeping him from

col apsing from exhaustion.

Gwen's attack on Rhys, her subsequent arrest and now her escape from

the hospital had made the national news – 'Madwoman on the Loose' –

including the drive-time phone-in show on Red Dragon radio that had been

debating her plight with a variety of mostly uninformed sources. One of the

cal ers claimed to have a contact in the Welsh police department who revealed

that 'This Cooper girl is a violent nutter that should have been sent straight to

jail' and that 'the police should be taking a much tougher stance on these

attacks, but they aren't because they were women what was doing them.'

Within hours, this supposed leak had scratched and clawed its way up to

Andy's superiors, who wanted to know what the hel was being done to find

Gwen.

Andy had returned to Swansea after his afternoon shift with more

information for Jack about the other women who'd experienced public

breakdowns around the same time as Gwen's. He had promised more help

that night, but since the 'leak' he'd been reassigned to set up a phone bank,

taking tips on sightings of Gwen. The news that these breakdowns were now

worldwide was sinking in and had also resulted in a deluge of cal s from men

and women in the area wanting to report their own family members for being

‘off their effing rockers’.

Jack poured Rhys another beer, setting it next to a frozen dinner he had

zapped in the microwave. ‘Andy has squads monitoring the motorway, Cardiff

airport, the train stations and al the ports. If Gwen tries to leave Wales, he’l

find her. The press are al over Gwen’s story, and he thinks that wil help.’

‘He’s wrong,’ said Rhys.

‘I know. Gwen isn’t going to leave you or Anwen. I think she just wants to

come home.’

‘Andy wil have some of his boys watching the house, too, then,’ said Rhys.

‘He’s turning into a smart lad.’

Jack nodded. ‘I spotted one on the street, doing a pretty good job of

standing casual y outside the bookie’s having a smoke. If you see him,

congratulate him on his choice of tracksuit. Showed off his bottom

magnificently.’

For a while the two men sat in silence, listening to Anwen chatter to herself,

tel ing stories about angry giants as she built a tower for her dol s and then

crashed her truck into it.

‘What about al the other women?’ asked Rhys. ‘Did they hurt themselves

too?’

Jack opened the files that Andy had left that afternoon. ‘The most violent

clusters in the UK so far are women in the Scottish highlands, one cluster on

the west coast and one near John O’Groats. Each of the women severely

mutilated themselves, then attacked a close family member. In two cases, the

woman murdered a loved one. Andy says the total as of this afternoon is 264

women across the UK. More international y.’

‘Bloody hel ,’ said Rhys, his wrist throbbing, his dinner congealing on the

plate in front of him. He looked about as pathetic and troubled as Jack had

ever seen him look. ‘What the hel ’s going on, Jack?’

‘Wish I knew, Rhys.’ Rol ing up his shirt sleeves, Jack lifted Anwen up and

set her in her high chair, tucked a bib under her chin, and sliced bananas and

toast onto her tray, most of which she tossed back at him, giggling.

‘You’re good with her, you know,’ said Rhys, popping open another beer,

quickly heading from numb to useless in any research tasks Jack had in mind

for him that night.

‘She’s a good baby,’ said Jack, handing her a triangle of toast slathered

in

Marmite.

‘It’s bloody Torchwood again, isn’t it?’ said Rhys, who had spent most of the

past few nights at the hospital, returning in the morning only to check on

Anwen, shower and change his clothes and pick up some clean ones for

Gwen. Jack was afraid that he might lose himself in his drinking if they didn’t

figure something out soon.

‘Wel , I’m fine,’ said Jack, wiping Anwen’s face which was smeared in

Marmite. At least she was eating, thought Jack, forcing down a corner of her

toast, the taste repulsing him.

‘You don’t count,’ snapped Rhys. ‘And if you did you’re not exactly proof that

Torchwood isn’t at fault considering that you’re the only one stil standing.’

‘Hey, you’re stil standing,’ said Jack. ‘And you’re doing fine, too.’

He walked over to his laptop and pul ed up the TV news. Water traffic in the

channel had been restricted. A parade of international scientists and

geologists were trying to get close enough to the geyser to examine it. The

geyser was slowly turning silver.

‘Look at that,’ whistled Jack. ‘It’s actual y quite a magnificent sight.’

The geyser looked like an explosion of silver fireworks against the setting

sun. Jack stared at the jet's pulsing spray, letting the images and the noises in

his head rise to a deafening roar, knowing that the answer to what was

causing this madness and this geological anomaly were locked inside his mind.

40

FLIPPING OPEN THE notes he had made earlier in the day and the file that Andy

had given him, Jack went back to the original three police reports and spread

them out across the table. The three woman whose files Andy had homed in

on were of different ages and ethnicities – the university librarian was white

and middle-aged; the second woman was black and in her thirties; the third,

Lizzie, was the madwoman from the supermarket. Jack lined up their

photographs next to each other.

'Al of these women are, according to their families and their friends,

peaceful and law abiding,' said Jack, 'and yet in al three cases, like Gwen,

they behaved in a bizarre manner and in the process of their… their madness,

they physical y harmed themselves.'

Jack picked up the photograph of the librarian, handing it to Rhys. 'Ginny

Davies plucked out her eyebal with no mind to how painful it must have been.

She told the student who sat on her until the medics arrived that,'

Jack picked

up the notes in the file and read, ‘that she “couldn’t look at the world that way

any more.”’

‘That’s horrible,’ said Rhys, looking sadly at the attractive woman who had

partial y blinded and seriously disfigured herself. ‘Do the police have any idea

what she meant?’

‘The police have no clue, but I think she may’ve been seeing things,

hal ucinating perhaps, and whatever she was seeing broke her mind.’ Jack

stopped and stared at Rhys.

‘What is it?’

‘Nothing… nothing,’ said Jack, going to the sink and pouring himself some

water. When he’d thought of the second woman’s mind breaking, he felt as if

the memory he’d been trying to snag last night in the SUV had for a fleeting

second flashed ful y formed across his mind. Then it was gone, leaving a thin

trail behind, a lingering bad taste in his mouth.

Jack gulped the water before returning to the table.

‘This is Moira Firth, 24, a waitress. She’d just served dessert to her family

of four when she headed into the kitchen and confronted her husband, the

chef, with a long rant about his adultery and then she picked up a

butcher's

knife and tried to cut out his heart.'

'Jesus,' said Rhys, taking the photo of Moira from Jack.

'Think yourself lucky that I showed up when I did,' said Jack, 'and that it

was only your face Gwen was sick of.'

'I've never seen these women in my life before, and I'm pretty sure Gwen

hadn't either. But here's the thing, Jack. Gwen was raging at me, but she was

real y angry at herself too, at not being able to be the action woman she used

to be, at how she was a terrible mother. It was like she'd let out al the

frustrations she'd always kept inside about being a mum and a wife and the

sacrifices she made for Anwen and me.' Rhys wiped his sleeve across his

eyes. 'But I made sacrifices too, you know, Jack. I've always supported what

she wanted to do, and I've protected her the best way I know how.'

Jack turned quickly. 'What did you just say?'

Rhys cowed a bit under Jack's stare. 'Wel , maybe my job wasn't always al

about saving the world from aliens or anything but it was stil important to me.'

'Rhys, don't be such a— Not that part. The Gwen part. Say again what she

was yel ing at you about.'

'Mostly about how she was a bad mum, and a bad wife and how she

didn’t

want to be one any more,’ Rhys choked back a sob. ‘I can’t believe that was

my Gwen saying al those awful things.’

‘That’s just it,’ said Jack. ‘I don’t think it was the Gwen who loves you and

Anwen. I think it might’ve been the part of Gwen that’s always been locked in

her subconscious that somehow took over and wanted to hurt you.’ Rhys

looked appal ed at Jack’s train of thought. ‘Perhaps that part of her doesn’t

want to be a wife any more.’

‘I don’t believe that’s how Gwen feels. Not deep down,’ said Rhys. As he

spoke, he slumped further over his beer and the photographs lined up in front

of him.

‘This is going to get much worse before any of these women get better,’

said Jack, ‘but it wil get better. And you wil get Gwen back.’

‘Do you reckon there’s something in the drinking water?’

Jack shook his head. ‘There’s definitely something connecting what’s

happening to al these women here and abroad, but it has nothing to do with

the water. I think something alien is attacking these women.’

‘I don’t get it,’ said Rhys, slurring his words, exhaustion and lager final y

breaking him.

Jack turned back to his laptop, staring at the image of the geyser, believing

that he final y did. The lip of the sun was kissing the horizon. Jack's fingers

tingled at the sight, the geyser like a stiletto stabbing the centre of the sun.

41

AFTER DINNER, JACK drove to the university library. The hunch that had gripped

him when he was looking at the sunset stil held him in its sway.

A librarian accosted him as he stood staring at the shelf on the History of

Religions in the Reference room. The woman was in her mid-sixties, short

white hair, dressed in grey slacks, a crisp white blouse with a string of pearls

at her neck. A pair of pink plastic reading glasses were perched on the end of

her thin nose.

'Sir, may I help you? You look lost.'

'More than you'l ever know.'

She smiled at him as if she knew exactly what he meant, even though Jack

was no longer sure that even he did.

'You do know we're closing in thirty minutes.'

'I know,' said Jack, fol owing the woman over to her desk. 'I'd like some

information.'

'I can sign you on to one of our computers, but you'l have to finish

your

search in fifteen minutes, I'm afraid.'

'Actual y, I'd like the help from you, if that's possible.'

'From me?' she said, putting her hand on her chest and exclaiming as if he'd

offered her a bouquet of roses and a box of chocolates.

'Yes,' he said, smiling, offering her his hand. 'Captain Jack Harkness.'

'Bernie Sanger.' She shook Jack's hand.

'Honestly,' said Jack. 'I'd rather have you help me instead.'

'Are you serious?' she said, offering him a seat in front of her desk. 'Is this

one of those reality shows, and I'm going to be viral on YouTube tomorrow?'

'Of course not,' laughed Jack. 'That would be a mean thing to do.'

She rol ed her eyes. 'Of course it would, but that hardly seems to matter

much nowadays. We like watching bad things happen to people. We've

become a mean-spirited society. Look at the way everyone's treating the

families of those poor women, as if they're lepers. You'd think we'd travel ed

back in time and hadn't learned a thing about psychology.'

'I couldn't agree more,' said Jack, taking out a sheet of paper with a picture

of the design Gwen had carved on her arm.

Jack believed that, in a fleeting moment of lucidity before she had attacked

Rhys, for some reason Gwen had wanted to remember the image. Jack knew

Gwen wel enough to believe that the image was a message of some kind for

him. This image was somehow vital to saving Gwen and the other women.

‘It’s just that I never get asked for help much here any more,’ continued the

librarian. ‘I’ve become nothing more than a glorified room monitor or a polite

guide to the nearest toilet. I don’t even have to re-shelf books much, so few

are checked out.’

‘Sad, isn’t it,’ said Jack. He looked round the impressive room, its wood-

panel ed wal s, wide windows, and rows of books looking the same as it had

in the nineteenth century, when he had first been there. There was something

comforting in being surrounded by books al day every day, thought Jack, even

for someone like him who was finding comfort in so few things now.

One or two tired-looking scholars and a handful of eager students were

hunched over the long rectangular tables. Al of the patrons had laptops open

next to them; only one had a stack of books. The room was quiet except for

the occasional cough or throat-clearing, the low burring of an incoming text

message, and the tap-tapping of fingers on keyboards. But in Jack’s

head the

noises were ever present, the flashes of faces and fragments of memory

bordering his vision every minute.

Since that afternoon, the image of the beautiful woman from the mirror had

haunted Jack's peripheral vision, reinforcing for him that his visions, especial y

the woman's face, and the sighting of the puma, were related to whatever was

happening to female synaesthetes around the world, and he had a strong

feeling that al of these things were preludes to something much worse,

something he needed to get ahead of before it was too late.

'They mostly come in here for the free Wi-Fi,' said the librarian.

'Or a nap,' said Jack, nodding towards one of the scholars, whose chin was

resting comfortably on his chest.

The strange woman's face lingered faintly in Jack's peripheral vision.

'Bernie, I need some research done on a few items, including some

information on an Inca tribe cal ed the Cuari,' said Jack, slipping two sheets of

paper across her desk. 'I'd be happy to compensate you for the work if it cuts

into your day.'

She scanned the two pages. 'That won't be necessary. For a few days, let

them find the toilet on their own.'

‘Oh,’ said Jack, standing to leave, ‘and I’d appreciate it if you kept this

between us.’

‘Captain, I may not be as fast as the internet, but I can keep a secret.’ She

folded the paper and slipped it into her desk. ‘How may I reach you with the

results?’

‘I’m leaving the country soon,’ said Jack. ‘If you could email the information

to me, that would be great.’

42

DR OLIVIA STEELE lived in a whitewashed Georgian mansion off the St Andrew’s

Road, west of Dinas Powys Common. The house was tucked in the woods, its

closest neighbour barely visible in the deepening dusk, except as jags of

orange light bursting through the trees.

Jack stopped in front of the iron gates at the entrance to the driveway. The

only evidence that he had found the right place was a smal brass plaque

beneath an intercom on the gates that read, ‘Steele Manor’, which Jack

thought appropriate for a doctor who healed people’s heads or a confused

superhero. Jack had cal ed ahead to make an appointment. When he pressed

the bel to announce his arrival, the gates swung open immediately.

The winding canopied approach was long and narrow. The road eventual y

opened onto a large circular driveway fronting the house. Dr Steele was

waiting for Jack at the front door. She led him into a marbled foyer where

another woman, dressed in a black jersey dress, revealing ample hips and a

perfect décol etage, took Jack's coat while Jack tried his best not to stare.

'My assistant, Win.'

Win smiled, accepting Jack's coat while asking if he'd like tea or coffee.

Jack said coffee, then fol owed the doctor to a sitting room off to the left of a

wide, carpeted staircase.

The room was comfortable and warm, expensive without being excessive. A

fire burned in a marble hearth, an original Mary Cassatt hanging above it. Jack

smiled. He had met Mary in Paris once or twice during the War. She would

have appreciated the irony that one of her paintings hung in a psychiatrist's

sitting room in the twenty-first century.

Jack settled in a high-backed leather chair. Dr Steele sat opposite him on a

matching leather couch. In white linen pants and a loose yel ow shirt, her skin

soft and pale, she looked, Jack thought, ten years younger than he

remembered.

She folded her hands on her lap, crossing her legs at her ankles. ‘Captain

Harkness, I must say your phone cal intrigued me, especial y since currently I

have a ful ward of women experiencing breakdowns similar to your –’ she

arched her brows – ‘sister’s. And, according to many of my col eagues around

the country, mine is not the only psychiatric floor ful of female patients.’

Her assistant carried a silver tray into the room with a decanter and two

crystal glasses on it. Setting it down on the table between them, she said, ‘I

thought you both might prefer a cocktail instead of coffee.’ She rested her

hand on the doctor’s shoulder in a way that suggested she was more than just

an assistant.

‘What would I do without you?’ The doctor placed her hand on her partner’s.

‘A great many things, I’m sure, but none of them with drinks served on time.’

‘Whisky, Captain?’

Jack nodded.

Leaning forward, keeping her ankles crossed, she uncorked the decanter.

‘Win’s family own a distil ery in the highlands. This is one of their best single

malts.'

Jack relaxed into the chair. 'Dr Steele, I want to apologise for getting off on

the wrong foot with you.'

'Olivia, I insist.'

'Then it's Jack.'

'And there's no need to apologise. It's forgotten.'

'Friends?' asked Jack.

'Friends,' said Olivia pouring him a healthy dram.

He tilted the glass before lifting it to his nose. He inhaled its smoky peaty

warmth, and as soon as he did he heard a distinctive chime of music that sent

a jolt of pleasure through him. He gasped. Recovering from the sensation

quickly, he answered, 'Wonderful. Truly.'

'It is, isn't it,' said Olivia, sitting back on the couch. She took a sip from her

glass. 'Of course, I realised when I got in the lift what you were doing, that

you incited my rant so I'd unwittingly reveal patient information. I should

probably have had you removed from Ms Cooper's visiting list.' She smiled.

'Although that's moot now, isn't it. An unforgivable error on security's part.' She

sipped a little more. 'Have you heard anything about where she might be?'

Jack shook his head. 'Not yet. Her husband is worried she may hurt

herself

again. Or, worse, someone else.'

'Yes,' said Olivia, 'that's seems to be the worst symptom of this strange

il ness, doesn't it? But Ms Cooper was given her anti-psychotic medication

before she escaped, so I hope she'l be less inclined to hurt anyone and wil be

back in custody before she needs another dose.'

Putting the glass to his lips, Jack took a sip, this time prepared for his

body's startling response. He held the whiskey in his mouth for a beat, then

another, letting the warmth of it caress his tongue, the sweet flavours

electrifying his entire mouth, every taste bud alive and tingling and then he

swal owed, the liquid like velvet on his throat. He shivered.

'You do look like you're enjoying the whiskey,' smiled Olivia. 'Win wil be

pleased.'

Not as pleased as I feel, thought Jack, shifting slightly in his seat. The

intense sexual feelings were wonderful, but not entirely welcomed. Jack was

aware that his body was reacting to stimuli in heightened ways recently, and

given what had happened during the earthquake, the sighting of the puma, and

his emotional breakdown, he was beginning to worry. He tried to focus.

Olivia balanced her glass on the arm of the couch. 'I believe you said you

had a theory you'd like to share with me about why al these women around

the world are fal ing prey to this so-cal ed masochistic madness.'

'We know a number of things already,' said Jack, reluctantly setting his

glass on a mahogany table next to his chair. 'Obviously, it's happening only to

women and each one is self-mutilating in some way during her psychotic

incidents. From the reports I've studied, the most common thing they're doing

is damaging their eyes, ears or tongues.'

Except Gwen, he thought, who's carved a strange symbol on her forearm.

'Suggesting,' added Olivia, 'that their neurosis is tied to their senses in some

way. Yes. I think that's a reasonable assumption.'

'Exactly,' said Jack, reaching to sip more whiskey but thinking better of it,

for now anyway. What he had to say was too important. 'I think al of these

women are synaesthetes, Olivia, and whatever is affecting them has made

their synaesthesia acute and extreme, overwhelming their senses.'

And mine, too, thought Jack. He glanced at the whiskey glass, catching a

whiff of its palate and experiencing another kick of desire that went right to the

growing ache of pleasure in his groin.

'Fascinating, Jack!' Olivia finished her whiskey and refil ed her glass.

She

held the decanter up to Jack who shook his head, more aggressively than he

intended. ‘I wrote a paper on synaesthesia in my third year at Cambridge. My

professor at the time was one of the first neuroscientists to study the

phenomenon seriously, and he made some quite startling discoveries about it.’

‘I know,’ said Jack. ‘I read your work and his earlier this evening.’

Olivia looked into her glass for a few beats. ‘You know, you may be on to

something, Jack. Synaesthesia operates on a spectrum, but unlike, say,

depression or many other mental disorders, synaesthesia is not a mental

il ness. Far from it, in fact. Many synaesthetes are artists and creative types

who believe it’s not an affliction but a gift from God, an incredible heightening

of their senses that al ows them to experience the world from multiple places

in their brain at the same time.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Jack.

‘Are you a synaesthete?’

‘I think I am,’ said Jack. ‘Or… I think I’ve become one. In the past few

weeks, I’ve started perceiving days of the week and months of the year as

colours and shapes, seen time in waves of coloured lines, sometimes even

with music.’

What he did not share was that in the past few days, this synaesthesia had

been getting stronger, affecting al of his senses in disturbing ways.

‘Of course – it *is* the nature of your brain, but it’s not the way most people

perceive the world. Yours, though, is one of the most common forms of

synaesthesia – grapheme to colour.’ She stepped over to a set of tightly

packed bookshelves and lifted a book from midway up. She handed it to Jack

before returning to the couch.

Jack read the title aloud: ‘ *Wednesday Is Indigo Blue*.’ He smiled. ‘Mine’s

golden brown.’

Olivia nodded. ‘Most synaesthetes don’t know that they are special, that

they are experiencing the world through multiple modes of perception. When

someone like yourself, say, with a mild form, tastes or smel s something he or

she wil experience the taste as a sound or a colour which heightens

perception. Synaesthetes are experiencing al of their senses at the same

time.’

‘Like our wires are crossed?’ asked Jack, thinking of the rush of desire he’d

experienced minutes before from the trigger, the taste and smel of the

whiskey.

‘That’s what we used to think, but scientists now believe, thanks to

sophisticated brain imaging, that it’s not crossed wires, it’s more like multiple

wires connecting al at once, senses cross-talking instantaneously instead of

connecting one to one. I’m simplifying, of course, but in the synaesthetic brain,

the connections among the senses are polymodal.’

Jack sat forward in the chair, the smel of peat from the whiskey quickening

his pulse again.

‘Years ago researchers had a difficult time separating true synaesthetic

responses from a person’s metaphorical thinking or even separating a

synaesthete’s response to a sense from a memory triggered by that sense.

Olfactory senses in particular evoke memories incredibly powerful y.’

Jack had to stand up, cool his desire, get away from his drink, the whiskey

too strong a siren cal to his senses. He stood in front of the fire. ‘What do you

mean, “metaphorical thinking”?’

She paused for a beat, before continuing. ‘An artist like Georgia O’Keefe,

for example, painted while listening to music, transferring what she heard into

her lush images. As far as we know, she was not a synaesthete. Wal y

Kandinsky, on the other hand, was a synaesthete, and he painted what he

heard when he perceived sounds. He painted his perceptions not

representations of them.'

'Ah… But if my theory is correct,' said Jack, 'and al these women were

mildly synaesthetic before the madness and now something is making it

worse… that'l be hard to prove, won't it?'

'Unfortunately, yes, but we can try, and it certainly puts us into a different

area of research from what we have been pursuing. It may mean that we have

to reduce their sedation in order to stimulate them when we run a brain scan,

and, of course, we'l need to talk to their families to be sure they are

comfortable with the risks that that may involve. But, Jack – this is a step in

the right direction towards healing. Final y.' She finished the last of her drink.

'Unfortunately, for many of these women, they've already damaged

themselves beyond repair.'

Jack looked at the Cassatt on the wal , wondering what she had seen when

she painted it. 'Synaesthesia is hereditary, isn't it?' he asked, thinking of

Anwen and her mismatched fruits, her association of colour with a taste.

'Yes it is,' replied Olivia. 'In my research, I discovered that there is a

chromosome marked for synaesthesia, and, although I can't prove it yet, I've

always believed that as human beings evolve, a person's synaesthesia evolves

too.'

Jack laughed. 'So those of us who are synaesthetes are more evolved than

humans who aren't?'

Which, Jack thought, made sense, given that he was from the 51st century.

As this thought flashed across his consciousness, it brought with it the face of

the beautiful young woman from the mirror, floating in front of his eyes. Jack

tried to keep her there for as long as he could, but Olivia was continuing and

he couldn't hold the image.

She was laughing at his assertion. 'That's one way to describe it.' Without

warning, she clapped her hands excitedly, jumping up from the couch. 'That's

it!'

'That's what?'

'No two people experience synaesthesia in the same way,' said Olivia,

excitement charging her pitch, 'but some studies have shown that it is

experienced more by women than men, present company excepted.'

The clock on the sideboard chimed. A dog barked somewhere deep in the

house.

'I'm sorry… Could you say that again?'

'Are you OK, Captain… Jack? You've gone a bit pale.'

'Sorry. I'm fine. Just trying to put some of this together.'

‘I was saying that the studies have shown that more women than men

experience synaesthesia.’ Olivia walked smartly across the room. ‘I realise

that their gender alone doesn’t explain why these particular women are

suffering.’ The excitement had drained from her voice. ‘Especial y given that

not al women everywhere who are synaesthetes are experiencing a

heightening of their senses. And this knowledge certainly doesn’t help us

explain any possible triggers.’

‘Ah, but it’s a start,’ said Jack. ‘It’s a start.’

Olivia opened the sitting room door and cal ed for Win to get Jack’s coat.

While they waited in the foyer, Olivia added, ‘At its most extreme,

synaesthesia can mean having shapes in your field of vision at al times. It can

scramble the senses in terribly debilitating and, as we’ve witnessed,

dangerous ways. Think about how you’d feel if you had an extreme form of

auditory synaesthesia which resulted in your ability to taste every single sound

that you hear. Loud thunder is rotten chicken, a baby crying is curdled milk.

Imagine what Piccadil y Circus would be like for you on a Saturday night,

never mind a simple dinner at home with the children.’

‘Vomit-inducing,’ said Jack. ‘Worse.’

‘Indeed.’

43

JACK STOOD WITH his back to the television, looking out of the living room

windows, staring at his own reflection in the darkness, his blue shirt cuffed at

his elbows, braces loose at his hips. Hair needs a cut, he thought, running his

fingers through it. Maybe a closer shave too.

It was after 10 p.m., and he knew he was leaving Wales the next day. Once

he'd returned to the Coopers' house, he'd spent a couple of hours thinking

about the narrative he'd created that day from al the data he'd absorbed from

his and Andy's research. Add that to the information Olivia had given him, and

the hypothesis that had been forming in his mind since he'd seen the image

tattooed on Gwen's forearm was al but confirmed.

He knew he needed more information and a different approach from the one

he'd been taking, one that needed more than someone, him, who was

emotional y connected to the key victim and being influenced just as strongly

as she was by some psychic force. Jack wasn't thinking about passing the

buck, but spreading the responsibility would help.

Jack was a loner, but he was not anti-social.

With the Hub destroyed, Jack had only one place where he could go to find

some of the answers, to have the equipment and the intel ectual power he

needed if the worst of what he was thinking was true. So he sent a message.

Jack could feel in his bones that time was running out. He just didn't know

whose.

Behind him, the television newscasters were babbling about the cancel ed

WHO press conference and how the lack of information coming from the

government about this strange mental il ness was becoming as startling as the

disease itself. Every news and social media outlet was circulating Dr

Ormond's press release.

Jack turned, aimed the remote at the television as if it were his Webley and

silenced the news.

'Hey! I was listening to that,' said Rhys, sitting with his computer at the

dining room table, lager in hand.

'It's not helpful,' said Jack, slouching onto the couch, landing on a squeaky

toy caught in the cushions. 'Now every Tom and Dick is going to sedate their

wives with whatever they can get their hands on as soon as she asks them to

play with the kids instead of going round to the pub. There's going to be a run

on tranquil isers.' He tossed the toy into the playpen on the other side

of the

room. ‘This whole thing is going to give a new meaning to domestic violence.’

Rhys sipped from his can. ‘You have a very dim view of your fel ow man.’

‘I’ve a very dim view of al kinds of creatures,’ said Jack.

‘At least some folks are trying to figure out what’s going on. You haven’t

come up with any bril iant answers, Captain Jack. My Gwen’s been mad for a

week and now she’s out there somewhere doing God knows what.’

Jack understood why Rhys was so upset, but he couldn’t tel him what he

was working out. He owed it to Gwen not to drag Anwen’s only parent further

into this.

‘I’m thinking about it. Ruminating over the situation. Gathering data.’

‘Oh, that’s what thinking looks like, is it?’ said Rhys.

‘No, this is.’ Jack put his foot up on the arm of the couch, posing like Rodin’s

statue. Rhys laughed, snorting lager across the keyboard.

They were both stopped in their laughter when Anwen’s cries burst through

the baby monitor.

‘I’l go up this time,’ said Jack. ‘You keep searching for something on that

image.’

‘You know this would go a lot faster if we could run your Torchwood

software.’

Jack stopped at the living room door. ‘I told you, Rhys. That’s not an option

right now. We’re on our own.’

*

Later that night, Jack was stretched out on the couch, unable to sleep. He was

stil dressed in his shirt and trousers. He had always been able to sleep in the

tightest confines, believing the reasons he couldn’t sleep in the massive beds

that everyone in this century owned – no matter how tiny their bedroom – was

as much to do with being buried alive as it was that too much open space

made him feel disconnected, like he was drifting from his moorings. It was a

feeling he’d thought he’d overcome; however, in the aftermath of his recent

experiences, Jack had once again found himself drawn to tight spaces.

Jack heard the front door closing quietly. Quickly tugging on his boots, he

ran through the hal , into the kitchen. In the middle of the table was Gwen’s

wedding ring and, propped against the sugar bowl, a handwritten note:

When she’s old enough, give this to Anwen.

Tell her I’m sorry and I love her.

G x

Jack charged through the door, pausing in the empty street. There wasn't a

sign of Gwen. Not even the distant echo of footsteps. But then, Jack had an

idea. These last few days, his senses had been turned up to eleven. Why not

use that to his advantage? He took a deep breath and held it, savouring it until

he could just catch the tiniest, familiar smel of Gwen – expensive shampoo,

old-fashioned soap, masked with a recent layer of hospital disinfectant and

industrial laundry. Feeling a little like a bloodhound, Jack sprinted off on

Gwen's trail.

*

The pier had been closed for renovations. Renovations that kept being put

back and put back, as though the council were waiting for the rusting Victorian

structure to have the decency to give up and fal into the sea of its own free

wil .

Jack trod across the boards, feeling them creak and shift more than he'd

hoped. He made his way gently towards the figure at the end of the pier,

silhouetted against the low moon. She must know he was there. He just

prayed she wouldn't jump now. Because that's al people real y came to the

pier to do these days – jump off it.

Jack crept forward, wondering when he dared cal out her name. If he

startled her, maybe she'd turn and fight – which would win him time. But if she

jumped into the sea… Jack started to calculate how long it would take him to

reach the end of the pier, to dive in after her, to find her in the cold, choppy

waters. He wanted to cal to her, try to reason with her, to let her know he

was going to find out what was happening, that he was going to save her, but

he didn't dare risk it, not yet.

Jack edged forward, plank by plank, feeling them shift and buckle under his

weight. Was it his imagination, or was the entire structure twisting slightly in

the waves? Had the recent tremors done the ironwork damage? At each step,

Jack caught his breath, to see if there was any reaction. Maybe, just maybe,

he'd be able to reach out, to grab her, to stop her…

'I know you're there.' Her voice was soft.

'Gwen, stop! Please.'

She turned, recognising Jack's voice but not yet seeing him. 'Jack? Jack?'

It sounded like the old Gwen. Jack moved faster. 'Gwen, let's stop for a

minute. I can help you. You know I can.'

‘Jack, please, leave me alone,’ she yel ed. ‘I can’t be near them – I’m so

afraid I’l hurt them. At the moment, my head is clear. I know what to do.’

‘No, Gwen,’ Jack pleaded, ‘It’s not. You’re not thinking right – your brain

chemistry’s been scrambled, you’ve been pumped so ful of drugs…’

Gwen smiled, and it was an odd smile that froze Jack to the spot. ‘Jack, I’m

just doing what I can to protect them.’

She’s going to jump, thought Jack, edging another step closer.

‘I can protect them. I’m beginning to make progress in figuring out what’s

happening to you. I think something’s been triggered in your DNA,’ he said,

doing his best to keep her talking. ‘Remember Torchwood. We’ve solved

worse. We can figure out what’s happening to you.’

‘There is no Torchwood!’ screamed Gwen, ‘Don’t you get it? It’s gone. Over.

They’re al gone. Tosh and Owen and Ianto and poor, poor Esther. You

couldn’t save them, and you can’t save me. There’s only you, Jack. It’s always

been only you.’

Jack froze, stung by her words. Gwen’s anger wasn’t the fury of a

madwoman, but cold, rational rage. He felt like he’d lost his last friend in the

world. ‘No, Gwen. That’s not true. It’s going to be you and me. Both of us. For

a long time.' He risked a pleading smile.

Gwen turned away from Jack and took a step towards the edge. Jack

charged at her, badly misjudging how frail she had become in the past week.

He grabbed her waist and twisted backwards. Her fists smashed into his face

as they rol ed onto the creaking planks, tumbling over and over…

And over.

It took Jack a few seconds to realise he and Gwen were fal ing.

44

JACK AND GWEN hit the water stil fighting. The force of the water ripped through

Jack's nostrils, bursting inside his head. Gwen's legs tightened around Jack's

waist, and they plunged into the black sea.

Christ. It was cold. Jack knew that if they didn't start kicking up, they'd both

drown. He'd surface eventual y, gasping, gagging, but breathing again.

Gwen would not.

Gwen's grip loosened. She knew she had to free herself from Jack's

embrace or he would save her, pul her back to the surface to the madness

her life had become, to locked doors, straps on her bed, Rhys in a constant

state of fear, and Anwen terrified of her own mum. It wasn't right. She would

not live that way. She would not let Jack save her. Not this time. Not ever

again.

As they continued to sink, Gwen pummel ed Jack with her feet, kicking to

free herself from his grip. Jack could feel that Gwen was in a rage again,

battering his head, gulping water. Jack knew what she was thinking, and he

knew his only chance to save Gwen was to save himself, to get them both to

the surface. Now.

Forcing air out through his nose, releasing some of the pressure in his lungs,

Jack dolphin-kicked. Hard. Gwen's movements were working against him,

keeping him under the crashing waves, trying to climb onto his back and hold

him down.

Where was this strength coming from? Jack wrapped an arm under Gwen's

shoulder and for a fleeting moment, his Gwen stared back, the Gwen he

loved, her eyes horrified, wide and panicked staring directly into Jack's face.

He would not let this woman go. This wasn't about keeping Torchwood alive.

It never was. This was about keeping alive the woman he loved more than a

sister, a lover, a friend, more than his life now and for ever.

They final y broke through the surface. Jack struggled to breathe. Gwen

was coughing and gagging and trying to force herself back under. The waves

were pul ing them towards the jagged rocks of the beach, then dropping them

back under, the current too strong for Jack to swim against and fight Gwen at

the same time.

Jack lost his grip on Gwen. Immediately, she kicked away from him. Jack

yanked her hair and pul ed her back, but Gwen's rage was so powerful that

Jack couldn't tel now if she was trying to kil him, kil herself or trying to fight

for her own life, al at the same time.

She went under a third time, lunging away from Jack's grip.

Jack swam after her, locking his arms around her neck. Both of them

treading hard beneath the surface, waves smacking hard against their heads.

Gwen was coughing and sobbing, her fingernails scratching at Jack's neck.

Jack inhaled deeply, smel ing Gwen's terror – iron and lilac.

They went under again. This time Jack swal owed too much water and he

had to fight the urge to gag until they broke for air again. When they did,

Gwen's grip was even tighter on Jack's throat. Her struggles were wearing

them both down. Jack knew he couldn't waste any more energy this way or

they were both going to drown.

Jack let Gwen hold him under for the last time. Then with al his strength, he

forced her head and shoulders above the surface.

‘Sorry, Gwen.’

He drew back his fist and punched her. Dazed, her legs loosened their grip

and she slipped under the water. Jack grabbed her before the current could

pul her away from him. She moaned. He flipped her into a lifesaving hold,

keeping her head above the water, treading water until he was able to get

their bearings and strike out towards the distant lights of the shore.

*

A frantic Rhys was waiting for them in the kitchen, running into the street when

Jack, drenched and freezing, every muscle screaming, stumbled towards the

house with Gwen cradled in his arms.

Later, the two men sat on either side of the bed, watching Gwen sleep, an

ice-pack pressed across the bridge of her nose, the swel ing puffing out her

cheeks.

‘How many families do you reckon are having a night like this one?’

‘Too many,’ said Jack, leaning forward in the chair, taking Gwen’s hand.

‘Christ, if al these women are going to start taking their own lives whenever

they have a brief moment of sanity then the clock is ticking down faster than I

thought.'

Rhys stared sadly at Jack, realising that in al the years he'd known him he'd

aged only a little. Stil handsome, stil larger than life, stil with that same kil er

smile and dimpled chin, but changed somehow nonetheless. Jack glanced over

at Rhys. For a fleeting moment, Rhys saw such pain in Jack's blue eyes that

his breath caught in his throat. One thing Rhys was suddenly certain of, more

than ever: whatever Jack wanted to do, his actions would be to protect Gwen

and Anwen and, yes, him.

'This situation can't be left to right itself,' said Jack, turning Gwen's wrist

over so he could look for the mil ionth time at the shape she had carved into

her arm. 'Al these women can't just be left to heal themselves.'

'Too bloody right,' said Rhys. 'So what are we going to do?'

Jack smiled, tracing his finger above the pink wound on Gwen's arm. 'This

has to mean something. It seems so familiar to me, but I can't get the memory

of it to settle, to ful y form in my mind. And that is driving me nuts.'

'Is it alien?' Rhys asked.

'Yes,' said Jack. 'Maybe. I don't know. But I know I've seen it here… on

Earth. Somewhere. I know this is going to sound weird, but every time I look

at it I get this odd taste in my mouth.'

'Have to say, Jack,' smiled Rhys, 'not the weirdest thing I've heard you say.'

Jack drew the shape in the air above Gwen's arm, not wanting to touch the

pink raw wound again. Closing his eyes, he traced and retraced the image,

letting it seer itself into his brain. He kept drawing, over and over again. He did

this for so long that Rhys thought he'd put himself into some kind of a trance.

Gwen stirred, the ice-pack tipped onto the pil ow. Rhys reached across for

it. Gwen's hand shot out and she grabbed Rhys's arm.

'Kil me. Please.'

Part Three

‘The moon gazed on my midnight labours, while, with unrelaxed and

breathless eagerness, I pursued nature to her hiding-places.’

Mary Shel ey, *Frankenstein*

45

Whitehall, London, next day

AT 9 A.M. sharp, a severely coiffured woman in her twenties ushered Dr Trimba

Ormond into Alan Pride’s suite of offices in Whitehal , directly between Horse

Guards and 10 Downing Street. The London Eye was visible through the

window, a perfect metaphor, Ormond thought, for the man’s position in

government – there he was at the heart of everything, yet somehow

maintaining enough distance to avoid having to tilt too far one way or the other.

The madness that was afflicting women worldwide had been bumped down

the news agenda. The sporadic tremors and subsequent appearance of the

strange geysers rising up from beneath the world’s oceans had captured the

attention of the press, in Britain and abroad. Dr Ormond, however, was not

about to let the issue slip from Pride’s radar. Over breakfast with her husband

and daughter, she’d practised exactly what she was going to say to Mr Alan

Pride.

‘I respect the position you’re in, Mr Pride, especial y in light of this recent

oceanic event, but as far as we can tel these formations are benign. That is

not, however, the case with this mental il ness that’s affecting so many women

here and around the world. The public should be kept informed, and these

women deserve to be treated with the ful resources that we can bring to bear.

To simply continue to say that these women just need to be sedated is neither

a solution nor a palatable stopgap any more. The public has a right to know

what we’re doing to find a cure, especial y given the increase in suicides

among these woman and the rise in violent crimes towards their families. Are

we simply going to wait until they al kil themselves and then hope that the

problem wil disappear?’

Her daughter had found her argument convincing, but Ormond wasn’t sure a

10-year-old real y counted, or even much cared. Problem was, Ormond was

becoming convinced that far too few people in positions of power did either. A

few mad women was nothing compared to massive rock chimneys popping up

across the world’s oceans. If even the worst of the papers had bumped

the

story to an occasional feature, what chance was there of engaging public

interest in a few emotional y unbalanced women?

Ormond had wiped jam from her daughter's chin, kissed her husband and let

her driver carry her briefcase and her coat to the car.

'Try to stay sane today,' her husband had cal ed as she left. Funny man.

And now she was sitting waiting for a man who could decide on a whim

whether those women sank or swam.

'Mr Pride wil be with you shortly,' said the assistant. 'He's on an overseas

cal at the moment. Can I get you a coffee?'

'Thank you. Black. Two sugars.'

Dr Ormond was sipping her second cup when the heavy office doors swung

open and Alan Pride stepped out to greet her.

'My apologies for keeping you waiting, Trimba.'

He proffered his hand, his shake strong and purposeful, placing the other on

the smal of her back to usher her into his office. His hand on her back felt

warm, his fingers strong. Dr Ormond felt a kick of desire low in her abdomen

that took her quite by surprise. She let herself be guided to a round table,

where she was surprised to see another woman, about her own age,

already

seated at the table. Ormond felt a flash of anger that she hadn't been the first

one to the table and she wasn't going to have Alan Pride to herself.

Gracious, she thought, where on earth were these thoughts coming from?

She was happily married…

'Dr Ormond,' said Pride, pul ing out a chair for her, 'this is Dr Olivia Steele,

Director of Neuroscience at the Cardiff and Vale Health Board. She's also an

expert on issues of women's mental health.'

Dr Ormond shook Dr Steele's hand, feeling another jolt of desire shoot from

her fingers to her toes.

This morning, she thought, is turning out… interesting.

'I've asked you both to join me,' said Pride, 'because I've received some

good news and some disturbing news about the recent wave of mental il ness

among women in various parts of the world. As you know, Trimba, many of

the international health agencies are at a loss for treatment and, honestly, so

are we. Olivia, however, has brought me some new information and I thought

in light of your position that you should be one of the first to hear it. I must,

though, ask for a caveat: I need your signature on an Official Secrets

document.'

As if she'd been waiting for her cue, the minister's assistant marched

through the double doors and set a sheet of paper in front of Ormond.

'It's standard procedure in such matters,' Pride went on. 'Olivia has also

signed one. It simply states that anything you are about to hear about this

"Masochistic madness", as the press have label ed it, you may not reveal

under any circumstances.'

'And if I did?' asked Ormond, guiltily realising as she spoke that she was

only asking the question because she was annoyed that Dr Steele had signed

the papers before her. Ormond's desire had quickly turned to jealousy and she

hated herself – and Dr Steele – for the shift.

'If you did,' smiled Pride, 'then I'd have to kil you.'

He tapped the bottom clause of the document where it explained she would

forfeit al rights as a British citizen, and she would be considered an enemy of

the state. Ormond scanned the paragraph, and then signed the document, but

she couldn't quite shake the notion that Alan Pride might actual y have meant

what he had said.

'Thank you.' Accepting the document, he co-signed beneath it and slid it into

a folder sitting in front of him.

He tapped his iPad, the office lights dimmed and a photograph of a man

came up on the white wal in front of them.

‘This is Captain Jack Harkness. The Captain and I have worked together in

the past a number of times. He has a theory about what is happening to these

clusters of women. If he’s correct in his assessment, then we may have a

cataclysmic problem on our hands. I know this man’s history, and because of

that I’m inclined to grant him his request.’

‘And what is he requesting?’ asked Dr Steele.

‘He’s asking for our silence and a boat load of sedatives.’

The Ice Maiden

46

Off the coast of Wales, a week or so before Isela’s shot

EVA STOOD ON the port side of the *Ice Maiden*, binoculars in her hands. Next to

her, Hol is was leaning against the rails of the ship, his face tilted towards the

heat of the late-afternoon sun, smoking a cigarette. Eva lifted her binoculars,

scanning the distant Welsh coast, the ship anchored miles out to avoid

detection from the British coast guard and the naval ships now surrounding the

geyser.

‘It’s beautiful here,’ said Eva, ‘reminds me of home. This coastline is a bit

like the Pacific Northwest.’

‘About the only thing in Wales that reminds me of home is the smel of fresh

fish.’ Hol is flicked his burning cigarette over the side of the ship.

‘Hol is!’

He shrugged. ‘My bad.’

Turning from the sun, Hol is looked across the channel to the docks of

Bridgend. ‘They better bring somethin’ tasty back with them. I’m getting tired

of finding exciting things to make with frozen tuna and packets of scal oped

potatoes.’

‘And I’m getting tired of eating them. Any idea who this person is?’ asked

Eva.

‘He’s a friend of Cash’s from way back. I think they were on a mission

together in the 80s. Al very secret and scandalous, if I know Cash.’

Eva caught sight of a fishing boat pul ing away from a distant dock and

heading towards the *Ice Maiden*. ‘Is he a spy?’

‘Wouldn’t surprise me one bit, darlin’,’ said Hol is, pushing away from the

side and heading to the steps down to the kitchen. ‘Whoever he is, they’l

expect some dinner before we set off.’

Eva watched him climb below deck, and then she shifted back to

watch a

fishing skiff cutting through the waves towards them. Below her, Dana was

preparing the landing deck and the ladder. Looking up, she waved at Eva

directly above her.

Eva and Hol is had drawn the short straws and had been left on the ship

with Finn. The rest of the crew had gone with Cash to get supplies and to pick

up their passengers. Dana had drawn a new assignment that she had refused

to share, even with Eva.

Cash's reaction to reading the message in Welsh that had come across the

teletype had been strange and completely in character. He laughed, swore

profusely and said, 'Nothing like making an entrance.'

He'd turned to Vlad and told him not to worry about who had infiltrated the

computers, it was not an enemy and the power would return in a few minutes.

It had, and they'd stormed from the North Atlantic south to a port north-west of

Cardiff.

'So who exactly is crawling inside my hardware?' asked Vlad, when the

storm had abated and things below deck had returned to normal.

'Torchwood,' said Cash.

‘Never heard of them,’ said Eva.

‘I have,’ said Vlad. ‘Secret agency. Did some important stuff to get us al

dying again. Ties to the CIA, right?’

‘Maybe.’

Cash had Finn alter their course and brought them directly to the south

coast of Wales. Where they were heading from here was anyone’s guess.

*

‘Permission to come aboard,’ said Jack, saluting Dana, who stood on the

platform next to the ladder, the wind buffeting her against the ship’s iron red

hul .

‘Permission to do whatever the fuck you want to me,’ she grinned, throwing

herself into Jack’s arms, her head barely reaching his chest.

‘Such a lovely way with words,’ said Jack, swinging her off her feet.

Rhys was standing on the bow of the fishing boat, his face blanched with

worry, watching Cash, Byron and Vlad manoeuvre a stretcher with Gwen

strapped to it onto the platform, where Dana attached a winch to the

stretcher, then tilted Gwen to a standing position, her head flopping onto her

chest. From the controls in the wheelhouse, Finn then hauled Gwen up onto

the deck. Eva was waiting at the top, and made sure she landed softly,

realising immediately it didn't much matter. Whoever this woman was, she was

completely out of it, comatose even.

On the platform, Dana turned to Cash and from her tiptoes, she grabbed his

head and planted a long deep kiss on his lips. 'Behave yourself. Or when I see

you, I'l take even more of your money.'

'Rhys has everything you'l need, Dana, and you can trust him completely,'

said Jack, lifting his bags from the fishing boat.

Rhys held out his hand and helped Dana on board the fishing boat. She lifted

her bags and carried them down below.

Vlad picked up Jack's bags and Cash took the heavier cases – weapons,

assault rifles, he'd guess, if weight was anything to go by. But, who knows?

Jack's diverse and unusual weaponry always amazed Cash and he knew

better than to question its provenance.

Within fifteen minutes of the fishing boat docking with the *Ice Maiden*, Jack

was the last one remaining on the platform. Rhys remained as close to the

edge of the fishing boat's bow as he could without tipping into the sea. His rain

slicker was soaked and his face was wet with tears. The gulf between him

and Jack and Gwen had never seemed so wide as it did at that

moment.

‘I wish I could come with you. I could help,’ said Rhys, his voice choked with

emotion.

‘I know you could, Rhys, but you need to stay in Wales for Anwen’s sake.

Mary isn’t up to it on her own, you know that, and if I need something done

from this end I need to know I have you and Andy here to take care of it.’

Rhys nodded. When Jack had told him about the *Ice Maiden*, its mission

and its crew, and how he thought it’d be safer if Gwen was with him on the

ship rather than at the house, where she’d have to be under constant watch,

Rhys had reluctantly agreed. In the middle of the night, they’d hustled Gwen to

a Penarth hotel, not revealing to Mary that her daughter had been found and

certainly not tel ing her she’d tried to commit suicide.

That morning, while they were transporting Gwen to the fishing boat they’d

borrowed from one of Rhys’s mates, they’d listened to reports on the radio of

four women suffering from the same madness as Gwen having taken

overdoses and being found by loved ones too late to do anything but bury

them.

‘Rhys, you have my word, she’l come back to you whole. I promise.’

Jack

smiled, slowly saluted Rhys, then climbed up the ladder to the deck of the *Ice*

Maiden.

Drenched and despairing, Rhys clutched the stern of the bouncing fishing

boat al the way back to the dock, watching bleary-eyed as the ship's engines

roared to life and the *Ice Maiden* glided across the darkening horizon back out

into the Atlantic.

47

BELOW DECK THAT night the rest of the crew and its passengers – with the

exception of Gwen, who remained sedated and strapped to a bunk in Dana's

cabin – sat around the table in the mess for a meal of shrimp étouffée, bottles

of Jax beer from Hol is's private stash, and, at Eva's request, a fresh fruit

salad. The food had kept them in smal talk, their taste buds trumping the

crew's curiosity about their passengers. The dishes had yet to be cleared, but

Cash insisted that Hol is remain at the table with them for a little longer. Finn

took charge in the wheelhouse.

'More drinks al round,' said Cash, who, like Jack, was nursing the beer with

which he'd begun the meal.

Sliding his chair closer to Jack's, Hol is said, 'don't mind if I do, boss.'

'That was one of the best meals I've eaten in a long time,' admitted Jack.

The music in his head from the meal was, thankful y, soft and sultry. Since his

conversation with Olivia Steele, and his understanding of what might be

happening to him and the world, Jack had been doing his best to embrace his

synaesthesia rather than fighting the intensity of his multiple perceptions. He

had noted that, since he'd boarded the *Ice Maiden*, the synaesthesia had

lessened. He'd also not seen the vision of the woman's face since he'd left the

Coopers' house and travel ed further from the geyser.

'You could do with a little more flesh on your bones,' said Hol is, who had

used his Creole grandmother's recipe for the étouffée in hopes of impressing

this mysterious handsome stranger. Hol is hadn't felt this giddy after meeting

someone for the first time since he'd seduced the chef at the Mardi Gras bal

after only two mouthfuls of his gumbo.

Sam laughed. 'Who're you kidding, Hol is? You'd like your flesh to *be* on his

bones.'

'I wouldn't mind that either,' said Eva, who'd been drinking red wine steadily

through dinner.

Everyone was suddenly silent. Vlad's eyes widened in astonishment. Jack

bit his tongue. Then Hol is snorted, Sam grinned, Cash guffawed and the table

erupted in laughter.

Eva blushed bright red. 'Did I say that out loud?'

'Oh, yes,' laughed Vlad, 'very out loud. Maybe you should switch to water if

we're going to get any work done at al tonight.'

Jack put his hand on Eva's. 'Your flesh on mine wil be a pleasure I'l look

forward to.' Then he turned and put his hand on Hol is's arm. 'Yours too.'

'Wel , now that we've got al the important stuff out of the way,' said Cash,

shaking his head, 'and I can't believe I'm saying this, but can we get down to

some business of the non-sexual kind?' He rol ed his eyes at Eva, who shrank

into her seat.

Jack explained what he'd learned from Dr Steele about synaesthesia and

how he thought something was heightening it.

'The medical community's response,' said Jack, 'has so far been to keep

these women sedated, like Gwen. The problem is that when they have any

moments of lucidity, some of them are aware of what's happening and have

already tried to kil themselves. Some of them have succeeded.'

'Synaesthesia is a pretty cool thing,' said Vlad. 'I mean when it's not out of

control. I know a few gamers who can see their compositions and their coding

in colours and shapes.' He popped the top off another Jax. 'If you think about

it, it's almost like their brains are able to construct meaning from downloading

multiple codes al at the same time, like a synaesthete's hard drive is way

more sophisticated than the rest of us.'

'Are you a synaesthete, Vlad?' asked Jack.

Vlad shook his head, tilting his beer bottle. 'Only shapes and colours

dancing in front of my eyes are drug-or alcohol-induced, sorry to say.'

'I am,' said Eva. 'Wel , mildly anyway. And I never knew what it was cal ed

until I took a psych class in university and my professor was one. It would

real y disturb her if we came to class wearing too much perfume. She could

hear the smel s. Created too much noise in her head. She said she couldn't

concentrate.'

'Which is part of the problem with whatever's happening to these women,'

said Jack, accepting a slice of pecan pie from Hol is. 'The numbers that are

being official y tracked could be much lower than the reality. It's difficult to

know how many women are simply dismissing their symptoms and trying to

carry on as usual.'

'That's real y horrible,' said Vlad, pul ing another chair over and stretching his

legs across it. Jack noticed how intently Eva was watching Vlad. Jack

checked Vlad out, approving of what he was seeing but he thought Eva might

have to make the moves. Vlad was either oblivious to Eva's longing or he was

consciously ignoring her. Jack thought he could smel her desire from across

the table.

'To lose control of your mind,' said Sam, 'that's… that's crazy.'

Hol is leaned across the table and slapped Sam upside the head. 'Mr

Understatement, thank you.'

'Hel of a thing,' said Cash, 'if your wife comes after you with the cleaver

when it's her time of the month.'

Jack stared at Cash for a beat, then grinned and got up from the table.

'Know what, Cash? I think you might have hit on something. I should have

thought of that.' Jack went over to the chalk board where Hol is, in an effort to

give the ship's meals a little flair, wrote a daily menu. Jack looked at Hol is.

'May I?'

'Course, darlin'.'

Jack wiped his sleeve across the board, erasing most of the menu. He

picked up the chalk, addressing al of them. ‘I’ve been assuming that al of

these women with heightened synaesthesia are reacting to something in their

surroundings, and according to Dr Steele who’s treating a number of the

cases in Wales, there must be some kind of external trigger.’

Jack wrote Gwen’s name at the top. ‘Gwen has the chromosome for

synaesthesia.’ Jack noted this under Gwen’s name. ‘But what if because she

had a baby recently she also has a particular combination of chemicals in her

body that have been triggered along with her synaesthesia.’

‘If that’s true,’ said Vlad, ‘then it would also explain why not every woman

who is a synaesthete is experiencing this heightening, because it’s not just the

synaesthesia – it’s their hormones, too.’

‘I think so,’ said Jack. ‘But there’s stil a piece missing.’

Jack drew a circle round Gwen’s name and the word synaesthesia, then an

overlapping circling with the word hormones in the centre. Then he drew a

third and put a question mark in it. ‘If we’re going to help these women, we

need to find what’s in this third… circle.’

Jack stared at the image he’d drawn on the board, a Venn diagram. He

didn’t know if it was coincidence or not but it looked weirdly like the

symbol

Gwen had carved on her forearm.

Eva, who had been silent throughout the conversation, spoke up. ‘I think

Vlad and I may have discovered the third trigger.’

48

EVA UNROLLED A thick sheaf of printouts in front of Jack.

Cash rol ed his eyes. ‘Nothing fancy, lass, keep it simple tonight. He can see

the numbers and al the data tomorrow.’

Eva gulped her water and stood up. She put on her glasses. ‘For the past

week, Vlad and I have been monitoring a series of submerged tremors,

eruptions in the deepest parts of the ocean floor. None of which have resulted

in major tsunamis as you might expect, and none of them have impacted major

land masses. They’ve hit mostly on the edges of shorelines. But they’ve

resulted in underwater geysers like the one that broke through the surface in

Wales.’

‘Which ones?’ asked Jack.

‘Coast of Vietnam. Off the far northern coast of Scotland—’

‘And,’ interrupted Vlad, ‘the islands south of New Zealand, and the southern

coast of Peru.’

‘Peru?’ asked Jack.

Vlad nodded. ‘Shel ey’s running a program that’l look for tick points,

see

what comes up.'

'Shel ey?' asked Jack.

'Tick points?' asked Hol is.

'When you're comparing things in a paper chart the traditional way,' said

Jack to Hol is, 'you'd give tick marks or check marks to elements of similar

qualities, to situations or variables that overlap. Sort of like the centre of my

Venn diagram.'

Vlad nodded. 'If those geographic areas have anything in common, Shel ey

wil find them much faster than any of our brains.' He looked at Jack. 'Shel ey's

the ship's artificial intel igence. She also keeps the systems on the ship

running, but I think you knew that since you gave her the virus that shut us

down.'

'I needed your attention.' Jack sipped his beer, and looked across at Eva,

who Jack decided was as adept with technology and probably as smart as

Vlad, yet she kept deferring to him in the conversation. 'So you named your AI

after a Romantic poet?'

Eva shook her head. 'We named it after a Romantic poet's *wife*.'

'Go on, Eva,' said Cash, smiling. 'Finish your report.'

‘The final thing I’d add is… wel … I haven’t real y discussed it yet with

anyone else,’ she paused, taking a sip of her wine and not her water before

continuing, ‘but, wel , I think there may be a way to connect the underwater

eruptions with the cases of heightened synaesthesia.’

Jack looked over the map that Eva had created. ‘Let me see this on your

screen.’

Eva gathered up her files and led Jack and Vlad across the passageway to

the communication centre. Cash headed up to the wheelhouse with Sam,

leaving Hol is to clean up in the mess.

‘I’l check on Gwen,’ said Cash, on his way down the corridor.

In the comms centre, things had been settled back in their place since the

storm. The computer screens glowed in the dim light and an occasional beep

from a monitor punctuated the silence. Vlad perched on the end of his desk,

his hands in his pockets, while Eva picked up her iPad. The massive screen on

the wal powered up, displaying a map of the world with the epicentre of each

of the deep-water events flashing in red. Jack stepped in front of the map,

folded his arms and stared at it in silence.

On the flat screen on Eva’s desk, a young woman dressed in an off-

shoulder black velvet gown, her hair pul ed back from an intel igent pretty face

appeared. She was sitting at an old-fashioned writing desk, a fountain pen in

her hand. At first glance, Jack thought she looked like a woman from the

nineteenth century, demure and modest. Looking closer, he noticed a nose

piercing, a neck tattoo and more than a delicate amount of skin showing when

the dress shifted from her shoulder.

Jack laughed. ‘So this is what you think Mary Shel ey would look like today?’

‘Shel ey, meet Captain Jack Harkness,’ said Eva.

A sultry woman’s voice with an English accent answered. ‘The pleasure is

al mine, Captain. Welcome aboard the *Ice Maiden*.’

‘Thank you,’ said Jack.

‘I believe I’ve corrected the glitch in my programs that al owed you to

seduce me so spectacularly.’ Shel ey’s voice was youthful and playful.

‘My apologies for that, Shel ey.’

‘Apology accepted. May I ask… were you the creator of the program you

used? It appeared so elegant, so graceful, and yet it was quite brutish in its

approach. Its power took me quite by surprise.’

‘Let’s just say it’s not from around here,’ said Jack.

Vlad and Eva glanced at each other, puzzled and slightly disconcerted by

the nature of the exchange. Shel ey was a powerful AI, but social conversation

was not her strongest program. They'd never needed it to be.

'May I show the others what I've learned?'

'Be my guest,' said Jack, setting a flat disc the size of a hockey puck on top

of Vlad's desk.

Jack tapped the top of the disc and in an instant Mary Shel ey was standing

in front of Vlad's desk, morphed from a talking head on the screen to a ful y

formed female, a hologram, but an incredibly sophisticated one. Nothing

translucent or wavering about her. To the eye, she looked alive, standing

before them clad in a body-hugging calf-length black velvet dress that looked

like a character from one of Vlad's steampunk stories. On her feet, Shel ey

was wearing a pair of shiny cowboy boots.

'I must admit to always having had a sil y fascination with the Wild West in

America,' she giggled, kicking up her heels. Her fountain pen remained firmly

gripped in one hand and her black leather journal in the other.

'Wow!' exclaimed Eva, staring wide-eyed at their avatar.

Shel ey curtsied towards Eva.

'Wel , fuck me,' grinned Vlad.

'That function,' said Shel ey, pirouetting in front of Vlad, 'is not yet

operational.'

'Wel done, Shel ey,' said Jack. 'You've adapted the software to your

scaffolding quite quickly.'

'Yes, Captain. It feels as if it has been an integral part of me al along.

Although I'm stil absorbing a few minor details, I predict I'l be ful y functioning

for your needs in the next few days.'

'I can't wait,' said Vlad, keying commands into his computer and staring in

awe at what he was seeing. 'Look at this, Eva. She's synchronised with al the

ship's systems, including a mobility function.'

'Yes, Vlad, I can be accessed in this form anywhere on the ship and off via

the satel ite.'

'Bloody bril iant!'

Jack laughed, pleased that his gift to the *Ice Maiden* was making Eva and

Vlad happy. He knew Cash would approve and he certainly owed him a favour,

more than one. It was also the least he could do given what he was coming to

realise about the submarine tremors, the wide-spread synaesthesia and his

own fragmented memories, Jack had a feeling that their pleasure may be

short-lived.

Eva leaned over Vlad's shoulder, checked out his screen then stared back at

Jack. ‘I’ve never seen anything like it. You’ve multiplied her functionality,

adapted her modalities, increased her scope and intel igence… It’s like

you’ve…’

‘Made her bigger, better, smarter and sexier?’ said Jack, winking at Shel ey

who winked back.

‘Al those things,’ said Eva. ‘But she stil looks like our avatar.’

‘This design is amazing; I’m impressed. The algorithms are bril iant,’ said

Vlad staring at the code, and every few beats glancing up at Shel ey smiling

next to him. ‘You’ve morphed her in a way that I didn’t think we – I mean our

governments – had the capability to do yet with artificial intel igence.’

Eva had pul ed her chair up next to Vlad. ‘This is some serious cutting-edge

restructuring. I read about this code-layering in a paper once, but it was based

on some sophisticated theories, pretty sci-fi level design.’

‘Exactly,’ said Jack.

They both paused in their analysis of the program. ‘Where did you get this?

Are we going to have the men in black chasing us?’

Jack shook his head. ‘The few people who know of its existence are gone

or deeply sedated or no longer care. I needed a secure home for my program

and your system, your Shel ey, seemed as good a place as any to be

that

home. For now, anyway.'

'I'm gratified and honoured, Captain,' said Shel ey. 'Torchwood and I are

enjoying each other immensely.'

Vlad was taking furious notes, unable to draw his eyes from his computer

screens. 'This shit is amazing!'

Jack put his hand on Vlad's shoulder. 'You'l have plenty of time to enjoy

Shel ey to her ful est later. Right now, I need to have her do a little work.'

49

'SHELLEY,' SAID VLAD, 'show us what you've learned about the eruptions and the

geysers from your analysis of our deep-water data, including their current

activity and the order in which they occurred.'

'It would be my pleasure, Vlad.'

'What do you mean current activity?' asked Cash, as he walked into the

comms centre.

'None of the underwater events are on expected plate boundaries, and none

runs along traditional fault lines,' explained Vlad. 'But here's the even stranger

thing – each one is stil active, low level right now, but active nonetheless.'

'According to the data, Captain,' said Shel ey, 'these tremors are not

the

result of earthquakes but of volcanic eruptions causing a number of

hydrothermal vents to crack through the ocean floor.' She was tapping her

fountain pen on her journal. As she did so, aspects of the map were

highlighted on the screen, red pulsing lights representing the epicentres.

'These vents are similar to the one that has already risen through the surface

in Wales and one or two other deep water sites'.'

'What exactly is a hydrothermal vent?' asked Vlad.

'Essential y an underwater geyser.'

'And the order of these disturbances?' asked Jack, fitting this data into his

own theories.

'Eva has a hunch,' cut in Vlad, 'that these deep water events are

synchronised in some way.'

'The geysers beginning to erupt above the surface that the *Ice Maiden's*

probes are detecting,' continued Shel ey, 'is a primary consequence of these

hydrothermal vents. The first was off the coast of southern Peru, fol owed

exactly one minute later by deep-water eruptions off the coast of Wales,

Scotland, New Zealand and Indonesia. And, Captain, these hydrothermal vents

are not registering on any of our traditional measurement scales. Currently,

according to my data, only one other source is monitoring these vents.'

'Who?' asked Jack.

'The information is being downloaded from a UK government satel ite to an

office in Thames House, London.'

'Christ,' said Vlad, 'that's MI5. I thought you said this software and this

mission weren't going to bring the men in black on us.'

'This particular man in black is on our side,' said Jack. 'And although Shel ey

can monitor what they're doing, they cannot–' Vlad rol ed his eyes. 'Trust me.

They've no idea what we're doing, and I have my friend's word, that we'l be

al owed some freedom. For now, anyway. He's holding Big Brother and Big

Sister at bay.'

Eva was only half-listening to Jack and Vlad. She was much more interested

in the unusual discovery that the ocean had a number of new hydrothermal

vents erupting from deep within the Earth's core. More than she'd tracked

yesterday. As a scientist this was thril ing. Right now, it also helped her to

suppress the desire for Vlad that was not far beneath her surface. Her desire

was not helped one bit by the fact that the Captain, in a more refined and

imposing way, was pretty gorgeous too.

Focus, she thought. Focus.

‘According to my calculations,’ continued Shel ey, ‘a highly unusual energy

field from the first eruption is creating the ongoing tremors. They are not, in

fact, the result of any shifting of tectonic plates as Eva and Vlad had original y

speculated from the data.’

‘Is it morphic resonance?’ asked Jack.

‘I’ve been monitoring the morphic fields,’ said Vlad. ‘It’s one of my areas of

interest – was, that is, until my funding was stolen. I’ve not noticed anything

unusual.’

Shel ey continued. ‘The data also suggests that the water around each of

the vents has a considerably higher measure of carbon, iron and sulphur than

is normal. I’m also detecting traces of something else. I’l need more time for

analysis.’

‘The ocean floor always has measurable carbonic acid,’ said Eva. ‘It’s part

of the carbon cycle and part of the Earth’s natural waste disposal system.’

She was graphing the data onto another screen as Shel ey presented it.

Vlad was watching Shel ey, who said, ‘I beg your pardon, Eva, but although

you're accurate in your assessment that the ocean is part of the carbon cycle,

the amounts of carbonic acid I'm detecting surrounding each of the

hydrothermal vents is much higher than what is considered normal, and, along

with the water temperature, the levels are rising significantly on a daily basis.'

Shel ey drew her pen across her leather journal and projected her numbers

onto Eva's graph, showing that the carbon levels in the areas around each of

the underwater geysers were more than a thousand times greater than other

parts of the ocean. 'I'm also detecting many of the vents are forming vent

chimneys.'

'We must have a malfunction in our probes,' said Eva, shocked by the data.

'That's not possible in such a short period of time. Vent chimneys take

thousands and thousands of years to form.' She looked at Vlad. 'We dropped

the probes at al the places where there had been tremors initial y, but

something must be wrong. That data doesn't make sense. Shel ey, can we

activate the cameras on the probes that have them?'

'Activating cameras to the screen.'

Vlad stood and walked across the passageway to the mess, returning with

four beers, passing one each to Jack, Eva and Cash. Looking across the room

at Shel ey, he held up his bottle.

‘That function is sadly not yet operational either.’

Vlad took a long pul of his beer, as the live feed from three probes miles

beneath the ocean appeared on the large screen. ‘Al of our probes can’t be

malfunctioning, Eva. I’l run a diagnostic on the others, but for al of them to

fail, at the same time? Not gonna happen.’

Eva peered at the video images on the screen. ‘I don’t believe it. It’s like I’m

watching a mil ion years of the Earth’s evolution in seconds. What’s going on?’

‘What exactly are we looking at?’ asked Jack, standing behind the two

analysts.

Eva pointed to one of the vents where a beehive like structure was forming

around the underwater geyser. ‘These craters or cracks in the ocean’s floor

vent a complex combination of superheated chemicals and gases. The only

thing that keeps them from actual y boiling the water is the pressure from the

ocean. In al of these cases, what’s known as a vent chimney can be seen

rising up out of the ocean, surrounding each of the geysers. Shel ey, can you

bring up a clearer picture of a vent chimney?’

In the space next to Shel ey, an image appeared that took Jack’s breath

away. He leant against Eva's chair, a wave of images crashing through his

mind, one after another – a man, a kiss, a plane, a mountain, a fight, then

fal ing, fal ing, the ground opening up and swal owing him. A beautiful woman

kissing him deeply, passionately, longingly, a sleek, lithe, midnight black-eyed

puma. The fierce familiarity of the images shook Jack to his core.

He stared again at the picture that Shel ey had thrown up, aware that

something had shifted in his mind.

'This,' said Eva, 'is a vent chimney, a massive tower of oxidized iron, zinc

and rock rising out of the ocean floor.'

The chimney was spewing black smoke.

And suddenly Jack knew where he'd seen the chimney before. Inside a

mountain many years ago.

'Jack, are you OK?' asked Vlad, offering Jack his chair. 'You look like you've

seen a ghost.'

'Not a ghost… a sliver from my past,' said Jack, sitting down, calming his

racing heart. Jack final y understood that, for whatever reason, his brain was

rebuilding a gap in his memory, a void that had been there for a long time,

putting pieces together that long ago something or someone had split apart,

sending its shards boomeranging across his consciousness. And now

they

were final y returning.

Jack's brain needed more time to process what he was no longer forgetting,

time to let his memory fil the blank spaces as if it were rebuilding a damaged

track on a hard drive.

50

'SHELLEY,' SAID JACK, gulping most of his beer. 'How many hydrothermal chimneys

have the *Ice Maiden*'s deep-water probes detected in the past, say, two

weeks?'

'Including the one now forming off the coast of Wales, Captain, seven.'

'What!' said Eva. 'That's impossible. It's just impossible. It takes at least a

mil ion years for that kind of geologic phenomenon to happen. The Atlantis

Massif is at least two mil ion years old.'

'What the hel is the Atlantis Massif? Sounds like a breed of dog,' said Cash,

feeling more out of his league every minute of this conversation.

'Shal I explain?' asked Shel ey.

'Please,' said Jack, giving Vlad back his chair. Jack stood in front of the

screen, watching al the vent chimneys flashing on the map. Crossing his arms,

he stared at it, his jaw clenching and unclenching in sync with the pulsing lights.

‘The Atlantis Massif, named after the lost city of Atlantis,’ explained Shel ey,

‘is a submarine mountain in the North Atlantic approximately twelve miles under

the sea, rising at its peak approximately 14,000 feet. It can be found off the

northern coast of Africa and east of the Mid-Atlantic mountain range.’ With a

wave of her hand Shel ey brought up a computerised image of the underwater

mountain in the space between her and Jack. ‘Eva is correct. This massif is

2.5 mil ion years old.’

‘And,’ interrupted Eva, ‘the two or three other core complexes on the ocean

floor like this one that have been discovered are at least that old too. The

Earth simply does not respond to change that quickly.’

‘So, Shel ey,’ said Cash, ‘let me see if I understand this correctly.’

‘I can talk more slowly, Cash, if that wil help.’ Shel ey giggled.

Despite her growing anxiety, Eva laughed too. Jack shrugged as if a sense

of humour was exactly what you’d expect from a Torchwood program.

‘These tremors are creating hydrothermal vents and they in turn are forming

chimneys like this one,’ Cash said, ignoring them. He pointed to the growing

conical structures they were seeing from their underwater probes.

‘That is correct.’

‘And these geological phenomena are happening at a speed of evolution

that’s impossible,’ Cash caught Jack’s eye, ‘at least by the rules as we know

them?’

‘Also correct.’

‘If al that’s true,’ said Eva, final y regaining some composure. ‘Then what’s

causing the eruptions in the first place?’

For the first time since he and Eva had started monitoring these deep-water

events two weeks earlier, Vlad was beginning to worry that something pretty

bad was happening underneath the sea.

‘Have you ever heard of the Gaia theory?’ asked Jack.

‘Yeah,’ said Eva, ‘but it’s a theory with only a few disparate threads to prove

it.’

‘Oh, there’s a few more threads stil to be found,’ said Jack.

‘How do you know?’

‘Trust me.’

‘Gaia is one of the ancient names given to the goddess of the Earth,’ said

Shel ey. ‘The Gaia theory was named after her and it maintains that al living

organisms, including the Earth itself, are part of a complex process of self-

regulation that strives for balance and sustainability. This stability, this balance,

is dependent on three important functions: the salinity in the oceans, the

oxygen in the atmosphere and keeping deformation and destruction caused by

the human population in balance with both of those things.'

'Otherwise,' asked Vlad, 'what happens?'

'The balance is disrupted,' said Jack, 'and the Earth can no longer sustain

life as we know it.'

'And?'

'Listen,' said Jack, 'We know that global warming is out of control, that the

Earth's atmosphere is already damaged, maybe beyond repair, and we know

that global warming is affecting everything from weather to crops to species

extinction. If we now have hydrothermal chimneys suddenly flooding the

oceans with metal sulphides, then we're wel on the way to desalinating the

oceans and completely disrupting the Earth's ability to self-regulate.'

Eva was poring over the data that Shel ey had summarised, using a series

of calculations and simulations that would have taken her and Vlad months to

complete.

'Jack, you need to look at this,' Eva said. 'We now have a comparison of al

the dates and times of the deep-water events with the reported synaesthesia

incidents in the world.'

The three of them stood next to each other, watching the map light up as

one by one, the dates of the outbreaks of synaesthesia flashed in orange next

to the already pulsing red of the deep-water vents.

Vlad looked from one to the other. 'That's not good, right?'

'It's not good at al ,' said Jack. 'Shel ey, we need to know exactly what

these hydrothermal chimneys are spewing into the oceans and quickly.'

'It wil take me a little more time to analyse ful y, but on a superficial glance I

would say that it's iron, sulphur, carbonic acid, hydrogen and something else

that I cannot categorise yet from my samples.'

'Run the data as quickly as you can.'

'It would help if I didn't need to use part of my program for projection.'

'Of course.' Jack tapped the disc, and Shel ey disappeared.

51

Southern Ocean, a week before Isela's shot

THE FIRST HYDROTHERMAL chimney erupted from the ocean's surface and became

visible a hundred miles off the southern coast of New Zealand, forming a shel

around one of the smal er geysers to erupt.

A charter fishing cruiser was the only boat close enough to witness the

event, but the passengers on board, a honeymooning couple from

California

and two retired lawyers had no chance to report it, photograph it, tweet it, or

even comment about it among themselves.

Along with their four passengers, the cruiser's first and second mates

watched in awe as an uneven rocky shel began to encase the geyser as if the

water was shooting out rocks and building a wal around itself.

In 10 minutes and 42 seconds the geyser was encased completely, leaving

a massive conical structure visible above sea level, thin veins of pulsing silver

flashing across its ribbed uneven surface.

'Jesus Christ! What the hel is that?' said one of the lawyers, digging around

under his seat for his camera. He never reached it.

Seconds before the hydrothermal vent was sealed, his new wife let out a

low anguished howl, picked up her fishing spear and stabbed her husband

through his back.

'You should have taken me to Rome,' she mumbled.

She whipped round and slashed the throats of the two retirees with her

husband's fil et knife before they knew what was happening.

'I hate the stink of fish.'

The first mate saw the young wife charge at his friend with a bloody spear.

‘Danny! Look out,’ he screamed, pushing his friend away from the control

panel as the woman stabbed the harpoon through the back of his chair.

While Danny scrambled across the floor in a desperate attempt to get away

from the woman, his mate darted down to the cabin tearing open al the

cabinets, pul ing everything from drawers in a panicked search for the hand

gun that he knew the owner kept hidden for emergencies. He was tossing

books from the locker above one of the spare bunks when he heard his

friend’s dying screams from above.

Then silence.

Dropping to his knees, he dragged the extra fishing gear from a metal

storage locker from beneath the lower bunk.

‘Please be here. Please be here.’

‘It’s not,’ the woman said, a beat before she shot him.

Blood-splattered and muttering angrily to herself, the new wife climbed up

on deck, surveyed her carnage, then with a trembling hand lifted the gun to her

own head and fired.

52

JACK PUSHED OPEN the iron door of Dana’s cabin, stepping quietly inside. He

stood over Gwen’s bunk, brushing a wisp of hair from her forehead, watching

the steady rise and fal of her chest, hearing the slow drip of the IV sedative,

hanging from the bunk above. Gwen's arms were covered in bruises and she

had a purple target around her eye, but the wound on her arm was healing,

the image no longer as visible as it had been.

'You are one tough lady,' Jack whispered.

Lifting her hand, Jack checked her pulse. Normal. He'd been checking every

couple of hours, not only afraid of a reaction to the IV sedative but also afraid

she might break through the sedation and hurt herself again.

Jack kissed her forehead, tucked her arm under the blankets and backed

out into the passageway where he bumped into Hol is.

'Bon ami, perfect timing,' said Hol is, fol owing close behind Jack as he

navigated the tight passage to his cabin.

'What can I do for you?' asked Jack when he got to his door.

'I wanted to offer you dessert,' said Hol is.

'I appreciate that, Hol is, but I don't think I could eat another slice of your

grandmother's pecan pie no matter how delicious it was.'

Hol is stepped directly in front of Jack, placing his hand flat on Jack's chest.

'Ah wasn't offerin' pie.'

Jack grinned. 'In that case, you'd better come inside.'

*

A ship at dawn is never a quiet place. Every space is smal , every sound big,

every voice amplified.

Cash thumped on Jack's cabin door at 6.15 the next morning.

'Hol is Jefferson Albert the third,' cal ed Cash, thumping again, 'this is your

captain speaking. The one you work for not the one you're screwing. If you

don't get your worn-out ass into the kitchen and feed me, you'l be sorry you

ever set foot on my ship.'

Hol is rol ed away from Jack, grabbed his clothes and headed for the door.

'Later, mon cher. He's just cranky because Dana's not here and he had to

sleep alone.' Hol is blew Jack a kiss and darted down the passageway naked,

his clothes bundled in his arms.

'I can see where you've been, you know,' yel ed Sam, sticking his head out

of his cabin.

'I'm wil ing to share,' laughed Hol is.

Jack was climbing off his bunk when Eva pushed into his cabin. She

sounded breathless and looked exhausted.

Jack grabbed the sheet, wrapping it around his waist.

'Oh, sorry,' she said. 'I saw Hol is head to the showers. I figured you were

free.' She shrugged. 'It's a smal ship.'

Jack took two quick strides towards her. She backed into the door. Jack

leaned closer, his hip brushing against hers, his hand trailing along her bare

arm, lifting her head to his. She exhaled, but she didn't move.

'What can I do for you?' Jack whispered.

'Not that.' She blushed, but didn't duck out of his way.

Jack grinned and backed off, sitting on the edge of the bunk. 'Are you

always this easy to embarrass?'

'Not usual y,' she admitted, looking away from Jack's piercing stare.

'Been a while, has it? Vlad not fast on the uptake?'

This time even her ears burned. 'Vlad might be if I looked like Shel ey.'

'Hmm. Don't confuse Vlad's fantasy with what he real y wants; otherwise, it

wouldn't be a fantasy.' Jack pul ed on his trousers, letting his braces hang

loose. 'What brought you charging along here so early this morning?'

'Shel ey did.'

Eva set the Torchwood disc on the cabin's smal desk and tapped it. Shel ey

appeared in front of Jack.

'Good morning, Captain. You slept wel , I hope?'

'I did.'

For a fleeting moment Jack wondered if Shel ey had been in his cabin during

the night. He'd left his laptop on in case Rhys or Andy had tried to get

in touch

and some of Shel ey's intel igence was from an alien program, after al
.

Nah, he thought. She'd not been sentient long enough to think ful y for

herself. Had she?

Jack decided he'd need to monitor her evolution. He knew that when you

lived in a world with so many powerful machines wired together eventual y a

consciousness develops. He'd have to keep an eye on Shel ey.

'Captain, I wanted to inform you of the results of my analysis from the water

that has been surging from the hydrothermal vents.'

'Which,' added Eva, leaning on the door jamb, 'have increased significantly

in number.'

'How many more?' asked Jack.

'At least seven additional ones in the clusters we're monitoring, and they're

growing as quickly as the others.'

'That's not good news,' said Jack, sitting back on the bed. 'Is my friend stil

monitoring them, too?'

'Yes, Captain.'

'We may have to do something about that, Shel ey.'

'Yes, Captain.'

'Tel him what you've learned, Shel ey,' said Eva, wary of hearing too

many

covert details from this man; after a thorough web search, she'd found only

two significant things about him: he'd disappeared after the funeral of a CIA

agent and he liked to read.

'Three critical points, Captain,' said Shel ey. 'First, I've pinpointed the

elements that were proving difficult to detect last night. The first is an ecto-

hormone with a high density of androstenal, and the second element is

carnosine.'

'Carnosine is a toxic hormone that affects the nervous system,' said Eva. 'It

can create birth defects if you're not born with the genetic inhibiter, which has

to come from both parents. Geologists wil have a field day with this. Who

knew it was percolating beneath the ocean? We've never found anything like

carnosine in the Earth's crust before.'

'Not so fast, Eva. You can't share any of this until we can stop what's

happening. If the world learns the oceans are fil ing with a toxic hormone we'l

have global panic, and we don't behave so wel towards each other when that

happens.'

'But you can't ignore it, Jack! People are dying. More wil . At the rate those

chimneys are forming, they'l be spewing toxins into the air in…?' Eva turned

and looked at Shel ey.

'In exactly four days and forty-seven minutes,' said Shel ey.

Jack flipped his braces over his shirt and ran his hands through his bed hair.

'It's enough time.'

'For what?'

'My plan.'

'Oh good. You have a plan.'

Jack put his hands on Eva's shoulders. 'You real y need to get laid. You're

very tense.'

She shrugged Jack away. 'I'm not sure it matters, but what exactly is

androstenal?'

'It explains a lot,' Jack grabbed a towel. 'The heightened synaesthesia

among women, the extreme physical responses to their loved ones and the

increase in desire to those,' he looked at Eva, 'who are in need of sexual

release.'

'I agree,' said Shel ey, throwing a graph up displaying the amounts per unit

of both elements in the water. 'The quantities are significant and they are

building.'

'Would one of you please tel me what androstenal is?'

'Androstenal,' said Jack, 'is not just an ecto-hormone, Eva, it's a

female

pheromone.’

53

WHEN HE’D FINISHED eating breakfast, Cash set the ship’s course for the day with

Sam, then came back below deck, joining Jack, Vlad and Eva in the

communication room. Cash was glad he’d eaten a hearty breakfast to shore

up against what was coming because he knew that the information Jack

planned to share with the crew wasn’t going to be easy to hear.

In the comms room, Jack was watching a CNN feed of the black geyser off

the coast of Wales whose chimney was now visible above the surface of the

water. Since it was the first geyser to appear and had remained the one

closest to a populated area, it had garnered the most attention from the

media, the scientific community and the public.

The geyser was almost fifty metres in diameter, and was spewing black

steam 15 metres into the air, its rock chimney already constructing itself at

sea level. From above, the chimney looked like a clay pot spinning on a

potter’s wheel, a tower of water surging from its centre.

Although the Royal Navy and the coastguard had set a five-mile no-sail no-

fly zone around the Welsh geyser, the sea traffic on the Bristol channel had

never been heavier and so many helicopters were now swarming in the sky, it

looked like an invasion force of massive buzzing insects was hovering above

Wales and the south-west of England.

Cash joined Jack. ‘The media are reporting almost al of the country’s

psychiatric hospitals are ful ,’ he told him. ‘Most women are being sent home

with prescriptions for sedatives. The numbers in the other parts of the world

where the geysers have erupted and chimneys are forming are stabilising. I

think the Welsh chimney is worse because of the geyser’s proximity to a

population mass.’

‘And then there’s that reaction,’ said Jack, watching as the news camera

zoomed in on a coastguard cruiser off the coast of Weston-super-Mare,

escorting a yacht out of the no-sail zone, its naked female passengers

romping to loud music, thoroughly enjoying each other’s company.

Cash stepped closer to the screen, grinning broadly. ‘I’m liking that reaction

to the geyser much more than what happened off the coast of New Zealand.’

‘So are they,’ smiled Jack.

‘Any idea what makes the difference in the way a woman responds to the

pheromones the geysers are releasing?' asked Vlad.

'If I may,' replied Shel ey, looking at Eva for permission. Despite being a

creation of hers and Vlad's, Jack noticed that Shel ey deferred to Eva more

than Vlad.

'Of course,' said Eva, whose sexual desire had diminished the further south

in the Atlantic the *Ice Maiden* sailed, a fact that she had to admit annoyed her

a little, even though she knew she was reacting to the pheromones as much

as she was reacting to Vlad.

'Scientists general y type pheromones in multiple categories,' said Shel ey,

'the most common are obviously sex pheromones, then receptor, trail and

signal pheromones, each one triggering a response through a behaviour

change or a mood change in one or both members of the species affected.

The pheromone that I detected in the hydrothermal vents is an ecto-hormone,

a combination of two or three categories which is why it's triggering changes

in mood and behaviour in women, particularly fertile women, and the changes

seem tied to internal hormonal conflicts the women are already experiencing.'

'Which would explain why some women are responding with orgasms and

others with violence,' said Vlad.

'According to my analysis of the patient data, Vlad,' added Shel ey,

'currently the other point that explains why some women are responding with

violence and some with lust is tied to their synaesthesia. Most of the initial

clusters of women, the synaesthetes, tended to respond with violence, but I

believe that had more to do with the intensity of their heightened synaesthesia

coupled with their emotional stability and how both outweighed their sexual

desire.'

Jack thought about Gwen's response – how her frustrations over the

sudden changes in her professional and personal lives after the suspension of

Torchwood, how this emotional instability combined with the pheromones had

shaped a violent response in her. Yet, Jack thought, there was an aspect of

Gwen's madness that continued to niggle at him. Why had she carved the

glyph on her arm when so far Jack and Shel ey's research had not uncovered

anyone else who had seen or carved the same mark, other than Jack himself,

that is.

Why was Gwen's response so different?

Vlad and Eva began checking the overnight data from the hydrothermal

vents, monitoring al seven that had erupted, two of which were smal er in

diameter and had already sealed like the one in New Zealand. Shel ey shifted

next to Vlad's computer, wiping data to the air between them when Eva asked.

If not for a slight shimmer around the folds of Shel ey's dress that was most

obvious when standing close to her, she could easily be taken for another

member of the crew.

Jack watched the avatar interact with Vlad and Eva, impressed with how

wel Vlad's original program had married the Torchwood software with only

minor glitches.

'How bad are the numbers?' he asked Vlad.

'Bad,' said Vlad. 'The PH is off in almost every sample. Schools of fish are

beginning to wash onto beaches al over the Eastern seaboard and the west

coast of Africa.'

'What's happening doesn't make any scientific sense,' said Eva, chewing the

arm of her glasses distractedly. She stood and walked over to the screen that

Jack had switched from the news feed to the map. Once again, Eva stood and

stared at the pulsing lights.

'What are you seeing?' asked Jack, standing next to her.

‘Before you came on board I thought I could detect a pattern in the vents,’

said Eva, watching the lights. ‘But I couldn’t figure it out.’

‘Shel ey,’ said Jack, ‘can you download the file I gave you from Gwen’s

phone?’

Shel ey appeared next to Eva and she threw the file from Gwen’s phone up

between them.

‘It’s the image on Gwen’s arm,’ said Eva.

‘Where’s the file from?’ asked Vlad.

‘Gwen downloaded it to her phone from a computer the night before she

tried to kil her husband. At first I thought the message was for me, but given

everything that’s happening to female synaesthetes, I’m beginning to think that

it was intended for Gwen al along.’ Jack paused for a beat, then asked

Shel ey to superimpose the glyph image onto the map and drop out the

background details.

Shel ey did, leaving only the flashing lights and the outline of the continents.

Jack cleared his throat, and looked at each of them directly, aware that

what he was about to say would change everything, would make this less a

scientific mission and more a suicide one.

‘Every single one of these flashing lights is a hydrothermal chimney

that’s

already forming above the surface of the ocean, and we can assume when

they seal over they’re going to force al that pressure, al that heat, al those

combustible chemicals back to the centre of the planet.’

‘Which,’ added Cash, ‘wil essential y turn the Earth into a bloody big

hydrogen bomb.’

‘Holy shit,’ said Vlad. ‘Game over.’

54

EVA WAS SPEECHLESS. She slumped across her desk. Her emotions were already

in such a jumbled mess that she was having a difficult time separating and

categorising exactly what she was feeling. From the moment yesterday when

they had discovered how quickly the vent chimneys were evolving, Eva had

felt as if she was caught in a bizarre training simulation and at any moment

someone would step onto the ship and tel them al they’d performed wel on

this mission and now they could go home.

If what Jack, Cash and Shel ey were suggesting was true, in a couple of

days she might not have a home to return to. No one would.

‘Shel ey,’ said Jack, ‘let’s see this model of the Earth from above.’

Shel ey flipped the animation and zoomed out, the glyph linking al the

chimneys with the top one, the geyser in Wales.

‘Fuck me,’ said Vlad.

‘That program is not yet operational,’ said Shel ey.

‘When al the chimneys are linked together like this, it’s Gwen’s design,’ said

Cash. ‘And the map to a bloody big bang.’

‘If that is what’s occurring,’ said Shel ey, ‘then we must assume that these

hydrothermal vents are connected deep inside the Earth. Like this.’

Shel ey reconfigured the image, stripping the top layers from the earth,

slicing the earth in two, and showing what the linking of the hydrothermal vents

might look like from beneath the Earth’s crust: three overlapping, smouldering

tunnels of fire stretching across the world.

‘What does this al mean?’ asked Eva, her voice high pitched with fear, the

colour draining from her face the longer she looked at Shel ey’s model of the

core of the Earth.

‘I think it means,’ said Jack, ‘that the Earth is self-destructing.’

‘That’s ridiculous,’ said Eva. She looked from Jack to Vlad to Cash to

Shel ey and back to Jack.

‘Is it so hard to imagine, lass?’ asked Cash. ‘Think about it. We’ve worn this

planet out. It’s over-populated, terribly pol uted and the oceans’ temperatures

are rising fast. The old girl might just have decided she's had enough.'

'Look,' said Eva, standing and pacing across the tiny space, her fear

tightening in her chest. 'I can believe that the Earth is a series of complex

organic systems. I can even believe the Gaia theory that the planet's

constantly changing and evolving on a massive scale to stay in balance, to

sustain life, but the Earth is not a sentient being.'

'But what if she is?' interrupted Jack.

'O puhleeze,' said Eva. 'The Earth's not thinking, she's not processing al

that's happening to her and keeping score. Oh, too many people now. Check.

Too much global warming. Check.' Eva was ticking off on her fingers as she

spoke. 'Oceans are losing salinity. Check. Until one day the sun rises in a

smoggy haze and the Earth says to herself, screw it, had enough, time to

blow myself up and start life somewhere else in the universe.'

'Snark al you want, Eva, but I think Jack's right and that's essential y what's

happening,' said Cash.

'And we need to stop it,' said Jack.

'Eva,' cut in Vlad, 'in that entire rant why did you keep cal ing the Earth a

she?'

'Because everyone does… you know… Mother Earth,' Eva spluttered,

throwing herself onto her chair with such force she almost tipped it over.

‘Eva,’ said Jack. ‘Do you have any other explanation for what’s happening?’

‘If I may interject,’ said Shel ey, who appeared behind Eva’s desk. ‘Every

culture from the ancient Greeks to the Egyptians, the Native Americans,

African tribes, the Chinese, the Norse, and the Celts have a creation story and

many of those creation stories have humanity being birthed from the Earth in

some manner. The Earth is the mother to humanity. One sustains the life of the

other. Even Judeo-Christianity gave us the garden of Eden, a paradise on

Earth and—’

‘Shel ey, stop! I get it,’ Eva yel ed. Cash scowled at her. Vlad put his hand

on her arm to try to calm her. She pushed him away. Everyone was looking at

her, except Jack who was using the pad to zoom in on the map of South

America.

She stared at him for a beat, an awful realisation dawning. ‘You bastard!

You knew this was happening,’ hissed Eva. ‘You knew before you even

boarded our ship.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Vlad, sensing he had missed something

important.

Eva pointed at Jack, who stood and faced her. ‘He was the one who sent us

to monitor those hot spots in the ocean. He knew the Earth’s crust was

cracking, that these fissures were forming. He’s the one who’s paying for the

Ice Maiden’s mission. He’s the one responsible for al this incredible

equipment.’ She looked for confirmation to Cash. ‘Isn’t he?’

‘Aye,’ said Cash.

‘How could you possibly know this was going to happen?’ Eva shouted at

Jack, her yel ing drawing Hol is out of the mess to the passageway where he

hovered, listening.

Eva stood up, her fear and anger morphing to a dangerous mix. ‘Tel us how

you knew this was going to happen! Tel us! Because if we’re sailing to the end

of the world we deserve to know everything.’

Jack glanced over at Cash, who nodded. Jack moved away from the flat

screen. Cash shot him.

55

JACK GASPED, ONCE, twice then sat bolt upright, a bleeding hole in his forehead

slowly healing.

‘Fuck me,’ said Vlad.

‘Stil not operational,’ said Shel ey.

‘I need a shot,’ said Hol is.

‘Bring the bottle,’ said Jack.

‘I thought your head would be less of a mess than your chest,’ said Cash,

helping Jack to his feet and returning his Webley to him.

‘I appreciate that. My head’s taken more bul ets than I care to think about.

Takes me out instantly and the pain on the recovery is more tolerable. A bul et

to the chest hurts like hel before it kil s me.’

Hol is set the tequila bottle and glasses on Vlad’s desk, poured each of

them a shot, refil ed his glass twice, made sure Eva, whose face was frozen in

horror, drank hers before he grabbed a chair from the mess and dragged it

into the comms room.

‘I knew you had better recovery abilities than most,’ he said, grinning and

handing Jack a glass, ‘but that’s friggin’ ridiculous.’

Despite the pounding headache, Jack laughed, knocking back the tequila.

Then everyone began talking at once, the craziness, the ridiculousness, the

amazement over what they’d witnessed fil ing the room. Final y, Jack whistled

and brought some semblance of order to their curiosity.

‘So you’re like immortal, darlin’?’ asked Hol is.

‘Not real y. I can die, and, believe me, it hurts to die, but I heal, so

technical y I’m able to resurrect, which, I guess, if you stretch the definition a

little, does make me immortal.'

'But how is that possible?' said Eva. 'Is it because of what happened with

the Miracle? Did you not get cured after that happened?'

'No, Eva, I've been unable to stay dead for a very, very long time. My cel

structure was altered, oh, a couple of thousand years ago in my timeline.'

'And Cash knew?'

'Cash's grandfather was a col eague with Torchwood in Scotland.'

Cash nodded. 'The auld bugger was ful of secrets, but a few of the

important ones he left with me.'

'So I'm guessing,' said Hol is, 'with that kind of power you've seen some

things we haven't. Am I right?'

'Oh, you're right.'

Jack pushed his hair from his eyes, rubbing the closing wound as he did.

'And it's from my longevity, my experiences, that I think I can explain what's

triggering these changes in the Earth.'

Eva took another shot of tequila.

'A long time ago,' said Jack, 'a dear friend and a brave woman told me a

story about energy forces cal ed the Helix Intel igences.' Jack shoved his

hands into his pockets. 'Sarah Jane said it was possible that when our solar

system was forming one of the helixes was trapped in the centre of the Earth.'

Eva held her glass out to Hol is who refil ed it. Again.

'My first inkling,' continued Jack, 'of what might be happening under the sea

and to me, and to al these women, including Gwen, was a hunch, a response

to the fragment of a memory, and the urgency of a thin voice in my head

reminding me of Sarah Jane's story.'

'Great!' snorted Eva, recovering from the shock of what she'd witnessed,

the tequila helping too. 'We're supposed to trust you because of a voice in

your head.'

Jack shrugged. 'Listen. I know this is difficult to get your head around —'

'You think?' said Eva.

'But I think given how quickly these chimneys are forming we don't have

much time to act.'

Eva exhaled a long exasperated sigh. She sat at her desk, close to tears.

Vlad put his hand on her arm. This time she let it stay.

Hol is passed her another drink. 'It'l cure what's ailing you, darlin'.'

She shot back two.

Jack refused another, but Cash joined Eva and shot back two. 'Can't have

the lass drinking alone.'

‘I know about the Helix Intel igences,’ said Vlad. ‘There was a cadre of

physicists in the 1960s – some said they were a cult and spent too much time

experimenting with LSD. Anyway, they posited a theory that a powerful

sentient astral force was caught in the Big Bang and part of the astral force

broke off and was later fused into the centre of the planet. The energy force

gives the Earth its organic nature and it’s from this sentient force that life

evolved and is protected.’

Eva looked at Vlad. ‘Do you real y believe that? It sounds like another

creation myth, only one that involves aliens of a sort.’

‘And that’s the strangest thing you’ve heard today?’

‘The Helix Intel igences are not aliens per se,’ said Jack, ‘but sentient astral

forces. The Greeks cal ed them Titans, the gods of the gods.’

‘How do you know?’

‘The friend I was tel ing you about, she witnessed the Helix splitting.’

Eva looked at Jack, then Cash and final y Vlad. ‘You’re not seriously

believing this, are you?’

‘Eva,’ said Vlad, ‘Shel ey has data to prove that Earth functions that should

be taking two mil ion years to develop are suddenly happening overnight.

Thousands of women across the world are being driven mad from an ecto-

hormone, a sophisticated pheromone that's slowly seeping into the

atmosphere. Jack's explanation is the best one I've heard, and,' he held his

hand up to stop Eva who was about to interrupt him. 'And in 2009 a virus

infected the net. It was a fragment of a Helix Intel igence. I was one of the

techs tasked to study it.'

Eva put her head down on the desk. Hol is pul ed his chair next to hers, and

gently stroked her back.

'Hol is, what about you?' asked Jack. 'Are you buying my theory?'

'Jack, I'm buying anything you're sel ing, darlin'. I'm from N'Orleans. I've

seen plenty of weird shit in my day too.'

56

FIVE MILES OFF the coast of Wales, HMS *Churchill* reached its cruising depth at

300 feet below the surface of the Atlantic.

'Torpedoes at the ready.'

'Ready, sir.'

'Position confirmed.

'Confirmed, sir.'

'Release torpedoes.

'Fire!'

Inside the brightly lit sonar room, three officers of the Royal Navy and two

visiting commanders from the US Navy watched the screens as the

torpedoes

shot through the water to the ribbed trunk of the hydrothermal chimney. Both

torpedoes hit the structure at the same time, detonating against the surface of

the rock, sending a screaming sound wave bouncing back to the submarine.

The waves spiral ed around the entire ship, shorting every piece of electrical

equipment inside, and flipping the submarine a ful 360 degrees in the water.

The emergency generators switched on immediately. Only a handful of men

and women sustained injuries. When the engine crew adjusted the bal asts and

the submarine steadied itself in the water, the officers, shaken but remaining

steady on their feet, took a closer look at the damage the missiles had

inflicted on the hydrothermal vent.

‘Let General Laine at HQ know that the chimney has sustained no damage

from our attack,’ said the British commander. ‘We are awaiting further orders.’

57

‘FOR MONTHS,’ SAID Jack, ‘fragments of a memory have been haunting me,

flashes of something that until recently I thought was part of a dream, or

perhaps some kind of genetic memory. But when Cash sent me your data and

I reviewed your discoveries about these eruptions, I knew my blood had

triggered something deep in the Earth's core, and that I had started a

countdown to the planet's self-destruction. Again.'

'Again?' asked Vlad. 'This has happened before?'

'My blood,' Jack told him, 'along with global warming, over-population, the

extinction of certain species, al the things Eva was mocking, started decades

ago, in 1930 to be exact, but a friend saved me and unwittingly saved al of

us. I think the helix, the astral energy force trapped at the centre of the Earth,

has been searching for me ever since. It needs my genetic code, my 51st-

century DNA, to free itself. This sentient mass at the centre of the Earth has a

limited time span.'

'It's like the Earth has a planned obsolescence,' said Cash.

Jack nodded. 'Sort of.'

'Aliens were here,' said Vlad, 'and they slapped a Best Before date on us,

and now humanity's reaching its expiry date.'

'That's one way to put it,' said Jack, smiling. 'But the timing is wrong. If

global warming and those other elements continued then the trigger should

have been in the 51st century. Not now. Not today. But my DNA in the morphic

field messed up the geologic time scale and stimulated the archetypal memory

of the helix.'

'What's the geologic time scale?' asked Hol is.

'Shel ey, explain please?' asked Jack, his exhaustion making his bones ache.

The closer the *Ice Maiden* got to the Panama Canal, the worse his

synaesthesia.

Hol is slid the chair he'd been sitting on across to Jack, who straddled it.

Hol is parked himself on the edge of Eva's desk, his weight nudging her. She

lifted her head and looked into Hol is's dark eyes. 'You're awful sexy.'

Hol is winked at her.

'Geologists,' explained Shel ey, appearing next to Jack, 'and other scientists

use what's cal ed a geologic time scale to map the history of the Earth. The

time scale describes the relationships among critical biological and geologic

events, using strata studied in volcanic rock formations, fossil analysis,

population growth as wel as climate and oceanic changes.' Shel ey tapped her

pen to her leather journal, opening a chronological spiral above Jack's head,

spinning the conch shape only slowing it down at critical points as she spoke.

'There have been numerous cataclysmic events that are marked on the

geologic timeline. The breaking up of land masses, the freezing of the

polar

ice caps, the mass extinction of dinosaurs and other plant life, to even a minor

ice age in the northern hemisphere. Al of which suggests the Earth adjusting

and shifting to balance her systems.'

Jack leaned over the back of the chair, looking directly at Eva. 'So, yes,

Eva, the *Ice Maiden* has been monitoring the oceans for me, but I was hoping

that you'd not find anything out of the ordinary. But then when the behaviours

of certain women started to be affected, especial y Gwen's, and when I

discovered that Gwen had carved a message to me on her arm, then I knew

there was a connection between the two events. First tremors and changes in

the body of the Earth and then tremors and changes in the bodies and minds

of women, especial y a woman I'm close to. Not a coincidence.'

'So what's the connection?' asked Vlad.

'When Shel ey confirmed what was spewing from the hydrothermal vents

then I understood that women who were synaesthetes were being affected for

a reason, but not the one I initial y thought.'

Eva pushed away from her desk. 'I can't get my head around this. I need

some fresh air.'

She wobbled to her feet, and al the tequila shots had their effect, toppling

her into Vlad's arms.

She smiled up at him. 'You're very sexy too.'

Vlad rol ed his eyes and sat Eva back down at her desk.

'Go on,' she said, resting her head on her desk. 'I'm listening, Captain

Harkness, sir. Mister bossy spaceman. I'm listening.'

Jack pointed to the seven vents that as of today were al visible above the

surface of the oceans. 'Each one of these vents triggered synaesthesia in

clusters of women living close to them. I think their heightened synaesthesia

was simply a by-product of these deep-water vents. I think the Helix

Intel igence, the sentient force at the centre of the Earth, was looking for me.'

'But,' interrupted Hol is, 'and I say this from quite convincing experience,

you're pretty much al male. How come you've been affected by this female

hormone.'

Jack smiled at Hol is. 'Thank you, but my DNA, my cel structure, is much

more complex than yours and much less a dichotomy between male and

female chromosomes and if I'm right about my dream, about some of the…

the hal ucinations I've been experiencing then, because I've connected with the

force at the centre of the Earth before… it wants my DNA to free itself.'

'It's as if Jack's the helix's exodus code. It's way to escape back to the

universe,' said Cash.

'The Helix Intel igences are sentient astral forces,' Jack explained. 'They've

existed everywhere in the galaxies before any life forms. They may in fact

have been responsible for the first life forms. They are neutral, impassive

energy forces. But I think after this helix was trapped in the Earth's core, over

the eons it has absorbed many of our human passions, especial y the ones

that make us dangerous to each other – anger, hatred, revenge. Think about

how much blood has spil ed on this planet since the beginning of time, never

mind in the last seventy-plus years. I think it needs my life force to break free.'

Cash started to laugh, a loud deep infectious one.

'What's so funny?' slurred Eva. 'The world's facing annihilation and you're

laughing.'

'My Calvinist father was right al along,' chuckled Cash. 'The world is in the

hands of a spiteful, vengeful God. He must be rol ing in his grave.'

'So what are we going to do?' asked Vlad. 'Other than cal our families and

say goodbye.'

‘I’m going to convince the Helix Intel igence that it’s made a mistake – that it

needs to stop its self-destruct.’

‘How the hel are you going to do that? If the Helix Intel igence is at the

centre of the Earth, you’l need to go there to stop it.’

‘That’s the plan.’

‘That’s the plan?’ asked Eva.

‘Wel , sort of,’ said Jack. ‘But we do have one or two obstacles to overcome

before we get there.’

‘We?’ repeated Eva and Hol is in unison.

‘One or two obstacles,’ said Vlad.

‘Maybe three.’

58

AN HOUR LATER, the comms room was taking on the look and the feel of a Hub.

The tequila had been put away and maps, graphs, notes and calculations

spread across Vlad and Eva’s desk. Shel ey was running diagnostics with

Vlad’s help and Jack’s supervision. Jack smiled to himself, glad to be part of a

team again, and then he remembered that if his hunches were wrong, if his

plan didn’t work, they’d al be dead in four days.

Al . Everyone. The entire human race. No reset. Nothing. The End.

Except what would the complete destruction of the world do to him?

Best not to find out.

‘Can I help?’ said a slurred voice from the passageway. Jack jumped from

behind the desk as Gwen stepped into the room. ‘You didn’t think I’d let you

save the world without me. We’re a team, remember.’

Jack took Gwen’s arm and helped her over to chair. ‘How are you not

comatose?’

‘Oh, you know.’ Gwen managed an easy shrug. ‘If a Welsh girl can shake

off six pints and four jaegerbombs and then order a flaming Sambuca, don’t

expect the strongest tranquil isers known to man to keep her down for long.’

She smiled wearily. ‘Although I could murder a bacon sandwich.’

‘Me too,’ said Vlad.

Cash was taking apart a computer drive in the back corner of the room.

Without taking his eyes off the task, he raised his hand. ‘Me three.’

‘Coming right up.’ Hol is headed off to the gal ey.

Jack brought Gwen up to speed on his plan, the others passing her notes

and graphs when she needed them for clarification. By the time Hol is returned

with a platter of sandiwches, Shel ey was playing them the video of the vents

building under the oceans.

The footage ended on the feed of the chimney rising higher off the coast of

Wales. Gwen stood at the screen with Jack, watching the rocks around the

geyser get tal er.

‘Are Anwen and Rhys OK?’

‘They are, and so is your mum.’

‘Do you think Rhys wil ever forgive me for what I tried to do?’

‘Of course. It’s Rhys. He loves you unconditional y.’ Jack pul ed his

handkerchief and dried her tears. And so do I, he thought.

‘Are you sure this plan is going to work, Jack?’

‘Have I ever been wrong?’

Suddenly everyone stopped what they were doing, waiting for Gwen’s

answer.

‘Wel , there was that time…’ She let her voice trail off.

Eva’s eyes widened.

‘Trust him,’ said Gwen. ‘He’s the world’s last best hope.’

Eva put down the notes she was looking at, and said to Gwen, ‘So you don’t

think we should let someone in power – I don’t know, like the President or the

United Nations – know what’s about to happen so they can create some kind

of evacuation plan?’

‘And flee to where?’ asked Vlad. ‘Anyway, even if every country had their

own space shuttles, it stil wouldn’t be enough to save everyone.’

Eva tore into her sandwich, hot sauce dripping down her chin. Vlad reached

over and wiped it off with his thumb.

‘You don’t think anyone else could be monitoring the hydrothermal vents who

can hypothesise, as we did,’ said Eva, her mouth ful , her pulse quickening,

‘about what’s going to happen when they al seal themselves?’

‘The US Navy and the Royal Navy have submarines ful of scientists already

examining the vents in Wales and off the coast of New Zealand,’ said Shel ey.

‘For the past twenty-four hours, they’ve been trying unsuccessful y to take a

rock sample. Nothing is permeating the structures. They’ve tried an array of

weapons from their arsenal. It wil take them longer to trace the ecto-

hormones in the atmosphere and the increase of carnosine in the water; most

of their technology is not yet equipped for the tests.’

‘Unlike ours,’ said Eva.

‘Unlike ours,’ said Jack.

‘Because some of our technology is alien,’ said Vlad.

Jack scanned the room, making eye contact with each one of them, then he

nodded. ‘Most of my technology is alien.’

‘Fuck me!’ He waved his hand at Shel ey before she could respond. ‘I know.

I know. Not operational yet.’

‘I predict,’ said Shel ey, ‘that it wil be another three days before the world

wil be ful y aware of its predicament, and at the rate of evolution of the

hydrothermal chimneys, by then it wil be too late.'

'Someone else must realise we're facing an apocalyptic event and know

what to do to stop it, right?' asked Eva, the ful force of what was happening

final y, incontrovertibly sinking in to her consciousness. She began to cry.

Jack and Cash glanced at each other. Jack shook his head.

'That's not fair,' said Eva, tears running down her cheeks. 'Why should we

have to be the only ones who know the Earth is a turning into a big, stupid,

awful bomb? I never asked for that responsibility. I don't want that

responsibility.'

'Hey,' said Jack, 'I'm taking most of the responsibility and I real y do have a

plan, but—'

'But you need our help,' said Vlad.

'I need your help. Al of you. Because there are a few other events at play

that need to be handled before I can implement my plan.'

'Are you sure we can't just throw you into the stupid mountain and get it over

with?' asked Eva, wiping her face with her sleeve.

'Not going to be that easy,' laughed Jack.

'Of course, it's not.'

‘The helix needs my consciousness, my humanity, as one of the pieces to

initiate its big bang and to seal the chimneys. I’m going to give her exactly

what she wants, but with a slight change in the code.

‘You’re going to fool Mother Nature?’

‘That’s the plan.’

‘Wel ,’ said Hol is, ‘I’m tired of being the chief cook and bottle washer on this

ship. I’d like to earn a little respect. Think savin’ the world might be the thing to

do.’

‘If my plan works, Hol is, no one is going to know what you or any of us

have done.’

‘Trust him,’ said Gwen. ‘It’s better that way.’

Jack tapped the map on the screen until it zoomed in on the southern

coastline of Peru. ‘This is where it al began. And this is where it wil end.’

He smiled at them al . ‘One way or another.’

Part Four

‘All the earth is a grave and nothing escapes it’

Ancient prayer

59

Langley, Virginia, present day

‘HOW COULD IT get any damn worse?’ yel ed Rex Matheson, pacing in front of

the screen.

‘Watch.’

Darren forwarded the tape until he found the image on the screen that had

brought him running from his office in the first place. He paused and zoomed.

Staring up at the flat screen, Rex started to laugh. He couldn’t help himself

because frozen on the screen was a picture-perfect close-up of Captain Jack

Harkness sipping an espresso at a table in the piazza in front of the Hacienda

Del Castenado in the middle of one of the most important raids of Rex’s rising

career.

And Jack was smiling at the camera.

‘How the hel did he get in there. We’ve had that hacienda under surveil ance

for days. Only our guys getting in.’

‘Not sure, sir, but there was a bad storm the night before. I’m thinking,

maybe then?'

'And how the hel did he get wind of our operation?' asked Rex, impressed

with Jack's intel igence capabilities despite being furious that he was

interfering with the closest any agency anywhere in the world had come to

even a distant cousin of one of the three families.

'I don't know, sir,' said Darren, one of only a smal group of agents on Rex's

team who knew anything about Jack and Torchwood, and who had been

tasked to monitor his movements on a regular basis. 'Must be a leak on the

Peruvian end.

'Or else Harkness knows something we don't about what's going on in that

vil age.'

'What's going on in that vil age is a multi-bil ion-dol ar kidnapping-for-hire

business,' said Darren. 'One we got lucky enough to uncover in time to

blackmail Donoso's wife into letting us take her husband instead of the

kidnappers. Why would Harkness care about any of that?'

'Unless,' said Rex, wiping Jack's image to the corner of the screen and

changing the source to CNN where the geysers and the impenetrable rock

chimneys forming around them were now getting continuous coverage from

every major news outlet, 'unless being in that vil age in Peru has

something to

do with these geysers. And given Harkness's history, that wouldn't surprise me

one damn bit.'

'Sir, I've had an eye on Harkness off and on for months and he's been

nowhere near any of these geysers… Except…' Darren paused, letting his

words trail off, realising he may have made a mistake.

'Except what?'

'Wel , sir, I'm not sure but I think I remember reading an intel report that

Gwen Cooper from Torchwood was one of the victims of that "masochistic

madness" that so many women are suffering from. She was institutionalised

for trying to shoot her husband. Hang on, let me check.'

Darren opened another page on the screen, bringing up Gwen's file. He

double-tapped a smal section at the bottom. 'Oh shit.'

'Oh shit, what?' yel ed Rex.

'Gwen Cooper escaped from the hospital.' He turned and looked at Rex. 'On

the day the vent chimney burst through the surface of the Bristol Channel.

That's near Wales, isn't it?'

Rex slammed his hand on his desk. 'Yes, it's near Wales. Doesn't anyone

study geography any more? I knew Harkness was involved in al this.'

‘But what could Harkness know about the geysers that we don’t? The best

scientists in the world are trying to figure them out.’

‘Just because we have every scientist in the world testing those fountains

every way possible doesn’t mean a goddamned thing because it hasn’t

stopped any of those chimneys from growing,’ said Rex. ‘Harkness knows a

lot of things most of us do not. Believe me.’

‘So what’s he doing in Peru? The closest geyser to that part of South

America has already sealed itself, and the authorities are evacuating the

locality.’

Rex stared at Jack’s image. ‘I don’t know what he’s doing, but I’m going to

find out.’

‘Sir, I stil think it might just be that he’s figured out on his own the

relationship between Donoso and the three families. Maybe he’s going to try

to get to Donoso before we can. We should warn our tactical unit to keep him

on their radar.’

Rex walked closer to the screen and stared at Jack. ‘Does Harkness have

any support down there?’

‘No. Everyone in the vil age was marked when our team arrived.’

‘If he was bringing in any support, he’d have been smart to arrange for it to

arrive after we'd placed our people.'

Darren fast-forwarded the video feed to the dust cloud coming over the

horizon on to the meseta, the camera lodged high in the wal of the canyon.

'The minibus,' said Darren. 'If he's got any support, they were going in on

that bus with Donoso. There's no other way in and out of the hacienda right

now.'

'Stil nothing from Carlisle?'

'Nothing, but things went pear-shaped pretty fast down there once the girl

crashed the bus.'

'Shit. I hate kids.'

'Sir, keep in mind this is a live feed and this video is only about eight or nine

minutes behind. We may stil be able to salvage something, including Donoso.

Carlisle wasn't alone. We've a ful tactical unit in the piazza. Their orders are to

wait until Asiro kidnaps Donoso and takes him into the compound, then they'l

move in and kidnap him from the kidnappers. It lets us keep his disappearance

invisible if he is connected to the families. They won't know we're getting

closer.'

'I know what the plan is on paper, agent, I designed it. The problem is when

you mix in people things shift pretty quickly, and Harkness is no ordinary

person.' Rex shoved his hands into his pockets to stop himself from punching

a big hole through the highly polished mahogany wal s of his stupid office. I

should have gone in with tactical, he thought. What am I doing, delegating from

a fancy office?

'Where are we monitoring this from?' he asked Rex, jogging out of his office

and into the hal way.

'A warehouse in Cuzco via Tactical Room 14,' said Darren, holding open the

door to the stairwel . 'This wil be faster, sir.'

Both men sprinted down the stairs, Rex moving faster than his agent. 'I want

to see everything that's going on down there,' said Rex, 'and I want a direct

line to the unit's commander in the piazza. Yesterday.'

When Rex was in the tactical monitoring room and the feed from the piazza

was running live, Darren final y sheepishly asked him, 'What's your plan, sir?'

'To figure out what the hel Jack Harkness is up to.'

'And?'

'And either stop him or help him.'

Isela

Southern Peru, present day, minutes before Isela's shot

JACK FINISHED HIS coffee on the piazza, taking particular note of the peasant

women spreading their glazed pots and fabrics across the steps of the church,

their striped ponchos draped loosely around their shoulders. He watched two

food vendors wheel their carts close to the high gates of the hacienda,

clumsily unlocking the lids of their steaming food trays, their eyes darting on

everything and everyone.

In the distance, a cloud of red dust suggested the first tourist bus from Lima

was climbing the last leg of the canyon road onto the meseta. The girl in the

belfry was an unknown, but Jack decided she was the lookout for the bus and

her job must be to alert the hot young man doing the James Dean imitation in

the centre of the courtyard.

Jack concentrated on the sounds around him, filtering and marking them in

his mind, the only way he knew to track the woman, the Cuari guide he

needed to descend into the mountain with him.

Click. Click. Click.

Jack tasted oranges and a hint of ginger.

She was nearby. Did she know he had returned?

Jack tipped back in the seat, the sun warm on his face, glancing

longer at

one of the women on the steps as he stretched, Doc Martens peeping out

beneath her layers of multicoloured skirts. Touching her hand to her ear, she

mumbled something into the col ar band of her poncho.

Jack smiled. Gotcha.

Click.

Citrus flooded Jack's mouth. The ginger was fading from his tongue. She

was on the move.

Time to die.

Jack stood and threw some coins on the table. Glancing up at the bel

tower, he saw the young girl duck quickly out of sight. Jack was aware that he

was not going to be able to stop what was about to happen but, if he was

lucky, he could minimise the damage, find what he needed and stil reach the

mountain before nightfal .

According to Shel ey's calculations, at the rate the chimneys were evolving

and sealing, the Earth had six hours and twenty minutes left.

Jack ducked to the rear of the café and onto the airstrip where he bribed

the boys to sel their footbal . He took it and then dropkicked it over the hangar

to the jungle beyond. At least he could keep them away from the fighting for a

while.

When the boys had safely cleared the area, Jack sprinted across the

airstrip to the rear gates of the hotel, keeping his eyes on the belfry. He

tapped the comms unit in his ear.

‘The condor is in position.’

*

‘Glad to hear your voice, Condor,’ said Cash, from his seat in the rear of the

minibus. The driver, Juan, glanced at him curiously in his rear-view mirror.

Smiling across the aisle at Vlad and Eva, Cash folded up his laptop and

popped a disc into his pocket. Loosening his seatbelt, he manoeuvred down

the aisle to the couple two seats in front.

‘May I borrow your map, please?’

‘Yes, of course,’ said Gwen, who was stoned enough to keep her

synaesthesia at bay, but alert enough to participate in the mission. Gwen had

refused to be left on the ship, even threatening a cal to Alan Pride, who Jack

had confided to her had helped Dana with her intel igence. If anything

happened to them, Pride had promised his help to Anwen and Rhys. He had

also made sure that Dr Steele had given Gwen the right balance of drugs to

be useful to the team when the time came.

Cash took the map back to his seat, scribbled on it that Jack was

inside the

compound and so far Dana's intel igence had been accurate. There were other

forces at play in the Hacienda, Jack thought CIA, and that might make it more

difficult to get what Jack needed.

Cash returned the map to Hol is and Gwen.

On the *Ice Maiden*, before they jumped ship to get to Lima as quickly as

possible, Jack had been clear about his intentions and how they could help.

Given his memory of how the mountain had affected him when he was last

here, he knew he would need their help to make it to the top. The final stage

of the plan was the only phase Jack had never explained to any of them.

Once Jack found what he was looking for in the Hacienda del Castenado,

what was he going to do when he reached the top of the mountain?

61

AT THE REAR gate of the hotel, Jack signal ed to the guard that he'd forgotten his

cottage's key.

'I'm a guest of the hacienda,' said Jack pointing through the wrought iron

gates. 'Numero seis ocho seis.'

The guard smiled, nodded his head that he understood, but refused to open

the rear gates to the actual compound. ‘No entrada, señor. Deliveries only.

Please fol ow path back to piazza. Enter there.’

‘I real y don’t have time for that walk,’ said Jack, smiling and then reaching

through the gate, he grabbed the guard’s head, and slammed it against the

edge of the wal . The guard dropped to the ground.

Climbing up onto the gate, Jack flipped over to the other side, landing

graceful y on his feet directly behind a second guard, who turned immediately

at the sound. Jack raised his elbow, slamming it into the guard’s nose. Then he

pul ed the guard’s body behind the nearest cabana, where he removed the

man’s red T-shirt, his assault rifle, a knife, and his radio, which Jack clipped to

his belt, slipping his earpiece out and putting the guard’s in his ear instead.

Stripping off his coat, his shirt and his braces, Jack pul ed on the guard’s T-

shirt. He walked over to the fountain, splashed water on his hands and slicked

back his hair. He needed not to be an easy mark for Rex until he was ready to

be.

Jack knew Rex had to be watching this entire raid after he’d made himself

obvious in the piazza. Hugging the vine-covered wal , Jack sprinted to the front

of the hotel, the speakers above him blaring traditional Aymara music like the

tinny soundtrack to an old Western.

Inside the compound, the hotel was made up of six pastel-painted

bungalows in a U-shape around the main house that sat at the opening. Each

bungalow had an inner courtyard containing a private swimming pool and its

own lush tropical garden. After his arrival last night, Jack had discovered that

al the bungalows were empty. Given the real function of this hacienda, Jack

doubted there ever were very many guests who stayed voluntarily.

The main building housed a massive colonial dining room, the kitchens and

the Castenado family's private quarters. Through a locked gate just beyond

the main building, tucked under the heavy canopy of the jungle, Jack had

discovered the camouflaged barracks for Asiro Castenado's men.

Dana's intel igence had informed them that Castenado was running drugs

and a sophisticated kidnapping business. A wealthy businessman goes

missing while on vacation, his family, his business, his shareholders are

alerted, and no one else; the money changes hands and after the exchange

the businessman is found wandering the mountains, dehydrated but unharmed.

Problem was the kidnapping scheme was the smal est obstacle Jack

had to

overcome to get what he needed in the vil age if he was going to get to inside

the mountain in time.

Six hours left.

When Jack reached the locked gate to the barracks, he stopped, adjusting

the volume on the radio. In his earpiece, he could hear Antonio cal ing Asiro's

guards to their positions.

A voice in Jack's earpiece crackled, 'Acción!'

From the belfry, someone fired off a shot.

Damn! The girl was not just watching. Something else was going on.

Jack sprinted to the wal , climbing quickly and in time to see the minibus's

front wheel explode. The bus careened off the sides of the canyon wal like a

pinbal , once, twice, and then wham, a final ricochet flipped it over, sending it

skidding on its roof, coming to a rest against the canyon wal at the edge of

the piazza.

The bus was blocking the only road off the meseta.

62

FOR A FEW seconds after the minibus hit the canyon wal , Juan didn't move,

taking stock of his situation and his injuries. A cut above his left eye was

bleeding heavily and he felt as if he'd been in a cage fight. Shoving the

deflated airbag off his lap, he listened. Steam hissed from the engine. The bus

creaked and moaned as it settled against the canyon wal . He could smel hot

rubber. Behind him, the student, Eva, he'd heard her boyfriend cal her,

moaned and then was silent, her head flopping on her shoulder, blood trickling

from the corner of her lips.

Through the shattered windscreen, Juan saw the UN soldier sprawled a few

feet from the wreckage. He was breathing, but bleeding from a head wound.

Juan couldn't worry about him right now because suddenly a line of armed

men were fanning out from the gates of the hotel. As soon as they did, the

piazza was ablaze with gunfire.

Unfastening his seatbelt, Juan hit his comms.

Nothing. Static. He decided to stay with the plan despite the chaos outside.

Easing out of his seat, pressing his hands on the floor that was now the roof

above his head. He stared at the other couple who had been tossed up to the

front of the minibus and were unconscious, an avalanche of luggage piled on

top of them.

They were alive, but they were not likely to be making any sudden moves

for a while. Juan crawled out through the shattered windscreen and, hugging

the side of the van to avoid cal ing any attention from the gunfight in the

piazza, he slipped round to the back of the minibus, and released the

emergency exit. Gunfire strafed the top of the van. He pul ed open the doors

and threw himself into the rear of the bus.

‘Señor Donoso,’ he cal ed, tossing backpacks and camera bags from his

path. ‘Señor, you must come with me.’

Suddenly, Juan’s earpiece crackled to life. ‘Get him out of there now. This is

Deputy Director Rex Matheson. We need you to take Donoso straight to the

extraction point. Do not, I repeat, do not go near the piazza or the hacienda.

Do you copy?’

Juan tapped his earpiece twice. ‘Señor Donoso, please come with me. You

wil not be hurt. Your freedom has al been arranged.’

Donoso shoved his wife off his chest and scrambled up. ‘I’m already hurt,

you fucking idiot. This was not supposed to happen. Who took out the bus?’

His wife was regaining consciousness, cal ing his name over and over again.

‘Olivares, please, what has happened?’ she cried.

‘Now, Juan,’ said the voice in his earpiece. ‘This vil age is a war zone. Get

the mark to the extraction point.’

‘Sir,’ pleaded Juan, trying to ignore the demanding voice in his earpiece. ‘We

do not have a lot of time. You must come.’ Juan did not speak Portuguese so

he spoke in English. The cut above his eye was stinging as sweat dripped

from his forehead. The temperature inside the van was stifling.

Donoso scrambled to his knees in the debris, sliding a gun from his jacket

pocket as he did so.

‘Sir, please,’ said Juan, drawing his.

With no hesitation Donoso shot Juan in the head. His wife screamed,

scrambling frantical y inside her Louis Vuitton satchel looking for something.

‘Is this what you’re look for?’ With his free hand, Donoso lifted a second gun

from under his waistband, holding it up for his wife to see.

Cash began to stir from the backseat, his earpiece screaming static.

Donoso pointed his gun at Cash’s face.

Cash raised his hands in surrender. ‘Stop. Wait. I’m nobody.’

‘Everyone’s somebody!’ Donoso glared at him, cocked the gun, but then

after a beat he lowered it. ‘Don’t move, Mr Nobody.’

Cash slid down in the seat, fiddling with his earpiece. A cut on his leg was

bleeding down his calf, wetness seeping into his boot. That can't be good, he

thought. Up ahead, Vlad was staring back at Donoso and the executed driver

in disbelief.

Donoso pushed Juan's body out of his way, watching his wife crawl

frantical y to the nearest smashed window, dragging her LV bag behind her.

Cash put his fingers to his lips. Vlad closed his eyes. Cash couldn't see

Hol is or Gwen because of debris, but he could see that Hol is's arm was

moving, trying to shift a section of the side door that was pinning him on top of

Gwen.

The minibus reeked of petrol, the iron odour of blood and Donoso's own

perfumed stink. Donoso pul ed a cigar from his pocket, inhaling its scent, then

he crumbled it in his hand, flaking the tobacco over Juan's limp body. He

shoved his wife's gun into the waistband of his trousers then reached across

and grabbed his wife's leg before she could make it al the way through the

window. She screamed. Shards of broken glass shredded her arms and legs

as her husband hauled her back inside the wreckage. She raised her arms to

shield her face.

'You stupid bitch,' he spat at her. 'Did you real y think your skinny

body could

buy you more loyalty from Antonio than mine?'

Through the open emergency doors at the rear of the bus, Antonio raised

his weapon and shot Donoso's wife. Vlad gasped. Donoso turned and stared

at him, then he picked up the LV bag with his ransom money in it, reached his

hand out to Antonio and stepped from the rear of the bus.

'You have ten minutes to gather your men,' said Donoso, kissing Antonio on

the mouth before heading for the other side of the bus where two armed

guards waited next to a hummer. He handed one the LV bag.

'Then we must go. I've business to take care of.'

63

FROM HER POSITION in the tower, Isela couldn't believe what was happening. The

entire hacienda was under siege and it was al her fault. She'd watched the

bus flip, but that was part of the plan. It always was. Crash the bus. Give the

driver time to get the mark out and turn him (almost always a male) over to

her father's personal security guards, leaving enough doubt among everyone

on the bus as to whether or not the mark survived the accident while his

ransom was negotiated.

If the money came through, the mark survived the crash. If not, wel it

seemed his injuries were more serious than first thought.

Peering over the edge of the belfry, Isela watched in astonishment as one

of the old women draped in a colourful embroidered poncho, who moments

before had been lounging on the church steps beneath her, tipped over a

vendor's cart, dived behind it and began shooting at her father's men, who

tipped over tables in front of the restaurant and returned fire. The other

women were in fact men, pul ing automatic weapons from their baskets,

stripping off their shawls and skirts to reveal black special ops uniforms

adorned with enough ammunition and grenades to take out the entire piazza,

the tower included.

Stunned, Isela watched as the food vendors pul ed guns from inside their

steamers and began returning fire. The few real vil agers who had been in the

market were trying to flee for cover, some inside the café and others out

across the airstrip to the cover of the jungle.

Without warning, a burst of gunfire sprayed the wal of the belfry. Isela

threw herself to the ground, covering her head with her arms. Dust and rock

rained down on her. After a few beats, she realized that the shots were

col ateral from the firestorm erupting in the courtyard. Antonio and her father

were the only ones who knew she was in the tower. They'd have no reason to

fire at her.

But neither would anyone else. Everyone in the vil age was in her father's

pocket, which made imprisoning the mark as a doped-up patient in the

hacienda one of the more manageable aspects of the plan. As for her role, it

was stop the bus, create the diversion, climb down unseen as soon as Antonio

extracted the mark, and then get back inside the ranch compound and wait for

the ransom.

After the chalky dust settled around her, Isela watched in confusion and

disbelief as Antonio and the mark, a super-wealthy businessman from Brazil,

emerged from the bus, kissed… Kissed? She was stunned.

The pair split up, the mark heading for a car tucked behind the canyon wal .

Isela let the scene sink in, pinching herself that she'd real y seen what she

believed. She slid down the wal . She needed to think. It was bad enough that

the bus had flipped more violently than she intended and that she had no idea

who the other set of soldiers were in the piazza shooting at her father's men,

but Antonio attracted to men. How could she have missed that detail?

Isela lifted her binoculars and focused on the hotel compound, scanning the

area surrounding the ranch. The doors to the house were closed, the shutters

too. The entire house looked deserted. Behind the ranch, she could make out

the staff barracks – they too looked empty. Al of her father's men were

fighting below her. Where was her father?

Isela tapped her earpiece. 'Antonio, what's going on?'

No reply.

After the initial burst of gunfire, the shooting had stopped for a few minutes

but, each time anyone moved, a vol ey of shots sprayed across the piazza.

The scene looked and sounded like a battle from *Call of Duty* , but with one

disturbing difference. Isela had no idea who the bad guys were and what the

goal of the game had become.

The perimeter of the hotel compound was unprotected although she spotted

a couple of bodies lying near the delivery entrance. None of her father's

personal security guards were on the roof and the men who'd been shooting

from the wal s were dead or had fled. She counted three bodies under the wal

and at least three on the ground inside the compound.

With al the shooters hunkered down behind their crude barricades, the dust

from the courtyard was beginning to settle and the reloading and firing of

automatic weapons was replaced with the cries and yel s from the tourists left

trapped inside the café.

Isela watched as two passengers from the bus crawled through the

shattered windscreen, the man tossing backpacks out ahead of him and then

helping the woman through. She was cradling her arm and let herself slide

down from the smoking, crumpled vehicle. A second man and woman fol owed

them out.

Isela watched the first couple inch across to the soldier and drag him to the

rear of the bus. They had no sooner found cover than the shooting began

again in the piazza. Isela kept watching the bus, waiting for Juan to crawl out

next, but he never did.

In the piazza, no one screamed. No one yel ed. No one raised any alarm.

Isela had not expected anyone would. Like everyone else in the vil age, when

a kidnapping was in progress they al had a part to play, especial y if they

wanted to stay on the mountain and be protected.

THE KIDNAPPING OF Señor Olivares Donoso, one of the wealthiest men in South

America, a man with links to the three families, was in play and Jack

recognised that so far nothing was going according to plan – not his, not the

kidnapper's, or, he surmised, the CIA's.

From a corner inside the compound, Jack activated his comms unit.

'Cash, do you read? Cash!'

Nothing. Static.

Jack tasted sage, heavy and distinct. And ginger, stronger than before. And

then the voices in his head started, a serenade of low-pitched humming.

Too soon. Too soon to lose my mind, he thought. I need my notebook if this

is going to work.

Jack's stomach knotted at the state of the bus, on its roof, steam hissing

from its engine, no movement from anyone inside, but he had no time to react

let alone get to the wreckage to help Gwen and the *Ice Maiden* crew.

Seconds after Isela's shot, Castenado's men swarmed from the barracks,

leaving the inside of the hacienda protected only at its distant corners.

This might be Jack's only chance to search for his notebook. He knew that if

either the CIA or Castenado's gunmen won this fight, he'd not be free to roam

the mountain and time was ticking away.

Five hours and fifty-eight minutes.

Jack darted into the canopy of the jungle shading the perimeter of the

tropical gardens and the terraced courtyards. When the last of Castenado's

armed guards charged past heading out into the piazza, Jack slipped his belt

from his pants and jogged in line behind the last man. When he was sure he

was at the end of the line, Jack snapped his belt against the guard's head, the

buckle drawing blood. The guard whipped around. Jack smashed his fist into

the guard's throat. He crumpled. Dragging him behind a copse of

bougainvil ea, in seconds Jack had stripped the guard of his automatic

weapon, and the night goggles hooked to his belt.

Before abandoning the body, Jack took the guard's shades too.

Jack silently slipped inside the main house, finding himself in a glittering

foyer, its ceilings flecked with gold leaf, its wal s covered in Diego Rivera-like

murals depicting scenes from the family's dark and chequered history.

Jack figured he had about three minutes to get to Castenado himself before

the piazza outside became a bloodbath. Jack wasn't entirely sure what was

going on, but a simple kidnapping had become something much more. He

thought he had an idea what, but he couldn't take the time to stop and check

for sure.

A curving marble staircase dominated the foyer. Jack knew from his earlier

reconnaissance that Castenado's private offices sat at the back of the house,

looking out at the peak of the mountain.

'Hey, who the hel are you?' A large heavily armed American stepped out on

to the corridor, blocking Jack's advance.

Jack had about ten seconds to make his decision. Footsteps pounded down

the hal way behind the guard. In seconds, he'd be surrounded.

'I need to talk to Castenado, and I need to do it now.'

Jack was surrounded.

'No one gets past me unless I say so, and I want to know who the hel you

are.'

Jack raised his hands into the air. 'Tel your boss that I need to speak to him

about Renso Castenado.'

The guard squinted at Jack. 'Are you some kind of nutcase?' He took two

steps closer to Jack, his gun pointing at Jack's chest.

'No doubt about it, but you real y don't have time to debate the point with

me,' said Jack staring down at the gun.

Without warning an explosion from outside shook the building. Jack pivoted,

taking out the guard directly behind him, catching his gun in mid air, then rol ing

across the floor, the second guard's bul ets shattering a statue of Inti the Sun

God displayed in an alcove.

'Hold your fire!' a man cal ed to the guard about to take another shot at

Jack, who was scrambling back to his feet, arms raised, prepared to return

fire at the two guards who remained standing.

A tal , olive-skinned man in grey trousers, a loose white tunic, carrying a

black case, came out of the room at the end of the hal flanked by two guards

carrying heavy black bags.

An explosion of gunfire pelted the house.

'We're under attack, boss,' said a guard, another North American, sprinting

in from the courtyard. 'It's what we thought. Antonio's taking most of the men

with him. The rest are pinned under fire in the piazza. Americans. Maybe ATF

or CIA.' The guard took the bag from Asiro's hand. 'We gotta go, boss.'

Jack heard a voice answer in Spanish in his earpiece that the trucks were

loaded and in back.

Asiro stepped up to Jack's face. 'If it is you who has interfered with my

business, Señor, you should know I'm not a forgiving man. I wil return and I

wil hunt you down.'

Jack let his weapon drop to his side, and stepped closer to Asiro, a sad

smile on his face. 'My God, you are your grandfather's double.'

'You knew my grandfather?'

'Yes. He saved my life a long time ago. And that's why I'm not going to stop

you, but your grandfather kept something of mine that I need. I don't care

what's going on out in that courtyard. I don't care about your kidnapping

scheme, but I need my notebook.'

Asiro nodded to his guards, who dropped their guns, and began carrying

luggage and supplies out through the rear of the house.

'Who are you?'

'I'm the man who fel from the sky.'

Asiro's eyes widened. He stared into Jack's face. 'It can't be you… You'd be

at least as old as my grandfather.'

'Let's just say,' said Jack, 'I've aged better than he did. But if you want more

details, I'd suggest you pul back your men from the piazza and cut your losses

with the Brazilian. You're a marked man, Asiro, and I'd like to see you live to

be an old one.'

A wounded guard, obviously one of Asiro's commanders, burst through the

front doors of the ranch. ‘Boss, I don’t know what the hel ’s going on out there,

but we’re taking fire from al sides out in the piazza.’

Asiro’s eyes dril ed into Jack’s. Jack held his stare, noting Asiro’s tense but

cut jaw, a look of such concentration in his face that for a beat Jack could see

only Renso in his grandson’s stare.

‘What do you want from my family?’

‘I need to find a smal leather notebook, one your grandfather probably kept

safe, in a place where he kept his secrets.’

The gunfire in the piazza was getting louder and closer.

‘Asiro, you’re running out of time. Take your wife and your daughter and go.’

‘My daughter, Isela, has the diary,’ said Asiro, jogging down the stairs to the

foyer with Jack fol owing. He paused as a guard handed him a bul et-proof

vest. He pul ed it on and then turned to leave.

‘You may need this sooner than I wil ,’ said Asiro, handing his assault rifle to

Jack.

‘What about your wife and daughter? You’re leaving them here?’

Asiro waved his guards on and stepped over to Jack. ‘If you knew my

grandfather as wel as you say you did, then you know that he married the

mountain and neither my daughter nor my mother can leave.’

SHOULDERING ASIRO'S ASSAULT rifle and harnessing his Webley, Jack sprinted from

the ranch towards the hotel's gates. From his earpiece, he heard Asiro order

his only guard left inside the compound to open the gate and let Jack leave.

Jack sprinted quickly to the overturned minibus, sliding to safety behind it as a

vol ey of fire rained after him.

'Is everyone OK?' asked Jack, crouching beside Gwen.

'Minor injuries, thank God,' said Cash. 'Sam got it worst. A concussion, I'm

sure.'

Hol is slapped Sam upside the head. 'That's what he gets for missing our

flight and then almost missing the bus.'

'The fleet was in town,' said Sam, stretched out against an overhang of rock

that the rear of the bus had lodged under when it flipped, an icepack on his

head.

'It's Miami,' said Eva. 'Pretty sure there's always a fleet in town.'

'And you didn't even eat Hol is's sandwiches,' said Sam. Hol is slapped him

again. 'Ow! I'm in serious pain here.'

'And it could get worse,' said Hol is.

'How are you doing?' Jack asked Gwen.

‘I’m OK. I probably shouldn’t operate any industrial machinery or drive a

tractor, but I’m sure I’l cope.’

‘What’s going on out there?’ asked Vlad, making sure his laptop was

functional. ‘I thought the hardest part was going to be getting you up the

mountain.’

‘It stil may be,’ said Jack. ‘The noises in my head are stronger, I’m seeing

ribbons of colours in my peripheral vision and I’ve got a rock in my gut.’

‘Wheeee!’ giggled Gwen, squeezing Jack’s arm.

‘I think I know what’s going on,’ said Cash, tapping his earpiece. ‘The

soldiers who were undercover are a joint task force of CIA and ATF. The other

fighters are split between guards loyal to Asiro and those who’ve switched

al egiances to his stepson, Antonio, who, by the way, was sleeping with

Donoso, the mark. After we crashed, Antonio shot Donoso’s long-suffering

wife, who, you may be interested to know, was the one trying to have her

husband kidnapped in the first place, and, who, I may add, was also sleeping

with Antonio.’

‘Doof, doof, doof, doof, doof, doof, doof-doof-doof!’ Gwen sang the theme

from *EastEnders* before col apsing in giggles.

Jack glanced at her in concern. ‘How do you know al of that?’ he asked

Cash.

Nodding towards the chapel, Cash tapped his earpiece. ‘A lovely young

woman told me so.’

Peering round the bus, Jack confirmed what he already knew: Dana had

used her powers of persuasion and her covert connections to infiltrate the

CIA’s unit, and she was one of the women he’d spotted undercover on the

chapel steps.

Across the courtyard a handful of Asiro’s soldiers had taken cover behind

overturned food carts. Jack caught a glimpse of Isela peering over the top of

the belfry wal .

Beneath the tower, the peasant women had stripped off their colourful rags

to expose their black unmarked tactical uniforms. Jack watched as one of the

soldiers was setting up to climb the tower.

‘Shit,’ said Jack. ‘Cash and Hol is, cover me. Eva, Vlad and Gwen get Sam

into the house in the compound and wait for me there.’

‘Where are you going?’ asked Vlad, already helping Sam to his feet.

‘I’m going to rescue a princess from her tower.’

*

Jack dodged bul ets across the piazza, diving behind an upturned table outside

the café, whose doors were wide open and its windows blown out. Taking fire

from Antonio's men, Jack darted to the cover of one of the arches.

On the other side of the courtyard, four CIA 'vendors' had tipped over their

souvenir and trinket carts and were using them as barricades. These soldiers

were shooting at Jack along with the other guards from the hacienda.

It's the red T-shirt, thought Jack.

Throwing himself to the ground, Jack rol ed behind an upturned food cart, its

vendor crouched behind the steaming metal bucket.

'Who the hel are you?' the guard snarled, raising his gun at Jack, who

whacked him with a steaming container of pinto beans. The man screamed,

dropped his weapon, and swiped wildly at his face trying to stop the red-hot

beans sticking to his skin.

'None of your business,' said Jack, grabbing his gun.

Flipping its handle, Jack struck the vendor's forehead, knocking him

unconscious. Crouching low as he ran towards the tower, Jack pul ed on a

black Che T-shirt from another cart. A bit tight, but it would do. He yanked two

grenades from an injured soldier's belt as he sprinted to the edge of the

arched veranda.

Dropping low, Jack ran to the last archway before the tower. The rapid

gunfire flying across the courtyard was not abating. Staring out at the piazza,

Jack knew the shooting wasn't going to stop until there was no one left

standing. But Jack didn't have that kind of time. He could already feel his mind

slipping, his concentration fragmenting, his stomach doing double flips.

Glancing at the tower, he could see the soldier beginning to climb up the wal

to reach the girl.

Five hours exactly before al seven chimneys were sealed.

Jack needed to stop this gunfight at the Inca corral. So he pul ed the pins on

the grenades. Keeping his fingers on the triggers, he raised his hands in the air

and walked out into the middle of the courtyard. With shots chipping at his

feet, Jack tossed the grenades up into the air above his head.

66

AS THE GUNFIRE worsened beneath Isela, the clanging amplified in her head. She

was comfortable with her heightened perceptions so she thought nothing of

their intensity.

She couldn't believe her eyes when the *cóndor* leapt from behind the cover

of the arched veranda and tossed two grenades high above his head,

scuttling

Antonio's guards who were nearest to him. The American soldiers threw

themselves to the ground behind their barricades. The explosion kicked up a

thick cloud of smoke and dust, the *cóndor* 's body col apsing in the middle of it.

'Holy shit!' said Isela, her rifle clattering to the stone as the man, the

cóndor , jolted upright and gasped for breath. A little unsteadily, he stood up,

brushed off his trousers, rol ed and stretched his neck muscles, then picked up

his rifle and walked out of the swirls of dust.

Instantly, the shooting stopped. Her father's guards dropped their weapons

and ran towards the airstrip. Antonio's men fol owed them, firing wildly.

The *cóndor* stopped for a minute under the heavy canopy of the huarango

tree, its wide trunk ful of divots from centuries worth of armed attacks even

before today's stand-off.

When she could stand the noises in her head again after the explosion, Isela

lifted her binoculars and stared out at the airstrip. Four heavily armed men

were escorting Antonio to a black Hummer. Isela recognised their insignia as

that of Donoso's private army.

Hundreds of black and yel ow dots floated across Isela's eyes, her

anger

piling on top of her shame. Why had she listened to Antonio? He'd set her up

and he'd betrayed her father. What a dick she'd been.

67

THE AMERICAN SOLDIERS who'd been covering the airstrip fanned in and took

control of the piazza. Most of the dead and wounded were draped across the

bricks, their blood seeping into the clay, staining the pink in a mockery of its

playfulness. The music blared for a few more beats, until one of the soldiers

shot out the speakers.

Jack sprinted to Dana who was in ful SWAT gear and standing at the

bottom of the belfry. 'Have I told you recently how amazing you are?' said

Jack.

Dana smiled. 'Never gets old. What's the plan?'

'I need the girl. She has my notebook, which I believe has the code I need

to trick Mother Earth.'

A voice yel ed in Dana's earpiece; she held her finger up, silencing Jack. 'I

need the girl at the extraction point. I want to know everything she does about

Donoso. Someone's going to pay for this fiasco.'

'Our friends at the CIA want the girl, Jack.'

‘Can’t let that happen, Dana.’

Jack figured he could make a run at the tower and, if he was lucky, get

inside to the girl before the soldiers.

Suddenly Jack’s earpiece let out a high-pitched static squeal. Jack tore it

from his ear. His mouth fil ed with the taste of cucumbers and lemons and ash.

His knees buckled, his joints ached so badly that he didn’t think they could

take his weight.

‘Go to the others,’ Jack yel ed to Dana over the chaos. ‘Tel them it’s started

and be prepared.’

The ground beneath Jack trembled. At first it was just a slight rol ing

beneath his feet, but then the planks of the veranda began to pop up one at a

time al around the piazza. Jack stared in horror as the ground opened

underneath the bus, dropping it twenty feet into the ground. Two soldiers were

pinned beneath a massive rock crashing off the canyon wal when a long

fissure shot out from the meseta along the dirt, across the middle of the

piazza, opening a gaping hole in the ground sucking down anything in its path,

including the huarango tree.

The fissure shot between the roots of the massive tree, swal owed up the

ground beneath it, spitting up its long roots and tossing the tree over the far

wal of the hacienda where its tendrils gripped the mountainside like claws as

the tree tumbled into the sea below.

The soldiers standing at the bottom of the tower sprinted from the fissure as

it snaked directly at them. They never stood a chance, swal owed into the

earth as the tear opened wider and wider, taking wal s and buildings with it as

it snaked across the vil age towards the tower and Jack.

Jack sprinted paral el with the fissure leaping over crashing adobe wal s,

ducking to avoid torrents of debris. When he reached the tower, he yanked at

one of the lines.

‘Get down!’

The soldier bounced against the wal as she pointed her gun down at Jack.

‘Sir, this is no time to be a hero, get back to safety with the other tourists. This

wil be over soon.’

A clap of thunder rol ed across the ground. Jack ducked against the wal for

cover, thinking someone else had tossed a grenade. Roaring, the fissure

snaked up the wal of the tower, crumbling the stones to chalk on either side

of her.

‘Soldier,’ Jack cal ed up to her. ‘You need to come down.’

Letting out her line, she rappel ed to the ground seconds before the entire

side of the wal col apsed, bricks crashing down on her, leaving the bel

swinging precariously on the edge of the tower wal .

Jack helped her free herself from the rubble, seconds before the bel

crashed down into the rubble where she’d just been buried.

Her radio crackled in her ear. ‘What the hel is going on? Do you have the

girl or not?’

‘Not yet, sir,’ answered the soldier. ‘We’ve just had a minor earthquake here.

The piazza is destroyed. It’s stil happening. This needs to be a search and

rescue, sir. Our unit’s getting the civilians out to the airfield. We’l need a

couple of copters, sir.’

‘They’re on route with units trained in S&R,’ said the voice in her ear. ‘Your

mission has not changed. Get the girl and make the rendezvous. That’s an

order.’

‘Yes, sir.’ She cut off her comms unit, and returned her attention to Jack.

‘Who are you?’

‘Why does everyone keep asking me that?’

He brushed grit from his face and stared up at the tower, which looked as if

someone had taken a bite out of it. The fissure had stopped when it had

col apsed the side of the tower.

It had nowhere else to go, thought Jack.

Thunder rumbled off the distant mountains, the ground beneath them

trembling every few seconds, sounding like a series of tiny explosions under

their feet. Jack's vision was clouding with dots once again and he had a

powerful desire to jump from the wal and fol ow the tree into the ocean.

'Hey!' The soldier grabbed his arm. 'Where are you going? That's not safe.'

Jack ignored her, climbing up onto the rubble as high as he could, but it

wasn't enough to see into the belfry and expose Isela's hiding place.

The soldier regained her composure and her weapon, which she shoved into

the smal of Jack's back. 'Down. Now.'

'Do we have the girl in custody, yet?' hissed her earpiece.

Jack turned and hooked his hands above his head, looking into the soldier's

eyes. They were smouldering with anger, but it was the only emotion he could

read clearly from her expression. 'I'd be more than happy to cooperate with

you, soldier—'

'Captain Anderson.'

'Ah, Captain Anderson.' Jack cocked his head. 'A pleasure to meet

you, but

right now my priority – yours too – is to get that young girl out of that tower

before the next tremor comes. If I'm right about what's happening here, the

next one wil be worse than the one we just experienced. It makes no

difference to me,' he grinned at Captain Anderson, 'but you and the girl may

not survive being buried alive.'

Captain Anderson stared at Jack, noting the cocky, self-assured grin, the

piercing blue eyes that seemed to suggest that no matter what he decided

somehow he was going to get his way.

'What do you want me to do?'

'I want you to put your gun away and let me bring her down.'

She looked over at the other soldiers from her unit who were helping free

the injured from the rubble, setting up a triage out in the airstrip. 'OK. You get

her down.'

Captain Anderson holstered her weapon, stepped aside, and waved Jack

towards the tower.

'Thank you, Captain.'

It would take too long to disengage the pul ey and the anchor from the

rubble so Jack hung a rope over his shoulder, cuffed his trousers, dug a

toehold with his boots, then another with his fingers and began to climb up into

the tower. At the halfway mark, he stopped, aware of Isela watching him from

above. He didn't think she'd try to stop him until he got closer, but she was

trapped and she had to know that she was in serious trouble.

'Isela,' he yel ed. 'You need to get out of this tower, and your best chance to

get out of this mess is to come with me.'

He continued his ascent, hearing Isela load her gun and scramble to the

other corner of the belfry.

After two more steps, he was about to pul himself up and over the

crumbling edge and into the belfry when he heard Isela cocking her rifle. He

looked up. She was pointing it at his head.

Jack sighed, but kept climbing.

'I'l shoot you!'

'I've no doubt that you could and that you would, Isela, but kil ing me wil

only make your situation worse,' Jack said, digging his feet deeper into the

crumbling rock, creating a ledge from which to balance for a few seconds.

'That soldier below is from the American government. They have orders to

arrest you and hold you while they figure out your role in this mess here this

morning.'

On the ground below, Captain Anderson responded to a radio request that

two transport units were on their way in from Lima and when she returned her

attention to Jack he was shoving the nuzzle of Isela's gun out of his face and

hoisting himself up into the belfry.

'This tower survived the last two quakes,' Isela said, backing away from

Jack, her rifle stil aimed at his head. 'I'l be safer up here.'

'No, Isela. You won't,' Jack anchored the rope to the bel , tossing the excess

over the side of the tower. Isela's voice tasted like vanil a and cinnamon.

'How do you know?' she asked.

'Because that fissure wasn't the result of an earthquake. And I think you

know that. I need something you have of mine and I need you to take me to

your mother.'

Isela looked at him, deciding whether or not to trust him, keeping her rifle at

his head. Captain Anderson climbed up into the belfry next to them both.

'Wel isn't this cosy,' said Jack, moving to the other side, away from the stil

crumbling wal to more solid footing.

'Is. She. In. Your. Custody. Yet!' squawked the voice in the Anderson's

earpiece.

‘Isela, I’m Captain Anderson,’ she yanked the comms unit from her ear. ‘I

work for the US government—’

‘So you have no jurisdiction here,’ snapped Isela, backing away from her

and a little closer to where Jack was standing.

‘I’m part of a joint task force with the Peruvian government—’ she continued.

‘Even the Peruvian government has no jurisdiction here,’ Isela laughed,

dropping her rifle and sliding it into its case. She looked up at Captain

Anderson. ‘Besides I haven’t done anything wrong. I was up here shooting at

targets on the airstrip. You can’t prove I wasn’t.’

‘Until we can locate your father and your stepbrother, I’ve orders to take you

into my custody.’

‘And how exactly are you going to do that?’ asked Isela. ‘You can’t cuff me

or neither one of us wil get down from here in one piece.’

They both turned to Jack. He shrugged. ‘She has a point, Captain.’

‘I thought you were on my side?’

‘I said I wanted to get the girl down from the tower,’ said Jack, stepping

closer to Isela, ‘but I never said I was on your side.’

Isela looked at the soldier and grinned. She stepped closer to Jack.

‘On the other hand, Captain,’ said Jack, pul ing his belt from his

trousers. ‘I

didn’t say I was on her side either.’

In one swift movement, Jack had the belt tight around Isela’s shoulders and

arms, pinning her like a straightjacket. Responding quickly, Captain Anderson

bound plastic cuffs round Isela’s ankles. She lost her balance and fel at Jack’s

feet.

Jack flipped a squirming screaming Isela up and over his shoulder. ‘Isela, if

you want to survive this climb, I’d suggest being as stil as possible. I wouldn’t

want to drop you.’

Isela mumbled an obscenity into Jack’s shoulder. While he tied the rope

around his waist, he feigned dropping her.

She screamed.

He said, ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t hear what you said.’

‘Nothing,’ she said aloud and under her breath again, ‘What a dick.’

68

WHEN THE THREE of them were safely on the ground, Jack set a relatively

subdued Isela against the rubble. In the sky behind the hacienda, Jack spotted

two Blackhawk helicopters cresting the plateau.

‘The girl is secure,’ said Anderson into her comms.

‘Copy that,’ said the voice in her ear. ‘Someone wil meet you at Cuzco

to

transport her back to DC.'

'Let's get her to the airstrip.' Anderson crouched, cutting the plastic ties from

Isela's ankles. When she did, Isela kicked out at Anderson who saw it coming

and grabbed Isela's foot instead. 'Listen, I don't care how you get on that

helicopter, but you're going to get on that helicopter.'

Jack's head was pounding, and twice since he'd set the girl down he thought

he had stopped breathing. They had to get to Isela's mother soon.

Four hours and ten minutes soon.

Isela glanced at Jack who held her stare for a beat. He saw dots, outlining

the girl's face, dancing across her high cheekbones. Picking up Isela's rifle and

slinging it over his shoulder, Jack hiked over the debris toward the airstrip.

The piazza looked as if a monster has stepped into the middle, crushing

everything in its wake and leaving its footprint. The fissure had split the

courtyard in two, cracking through the arched verandas and toppling two of

the buildings as wel as the tower.

Anderson pul ed Isela to her feet. They fol owed Jack.

Seconds later, Anderson yel ed for Jack and Isela to stop, bringing her rifle

in front of her. Isela crouched, playing in the rubble.

‘What is it?’ Jack came over to Anderson, who was staring across at part of

the hacienda’s wal where the fissure had torn it asunder.

‘I saw something,’ she replied. ‘Over near the wal . Might be someone

injured.’

She freed the rope from her shoulder, lassoed it around Isela’s waist and

handed the end to Jack. ‘Get her to the airstrip. Those copters wil be on the

ground soon. I’m going to check it out.’

‘Yes, Captain,’ Jack said, smiling.

Jack towed an angry Isela towards the airstrip where Anderson’s unit was

busy with the triaged wounded, many of whom were propped against the

concrete hanger, sharing canteens of water. The dead were covered and lined

up on the other side of the airstrip.

The two helicopters were coming in low, like the advanced guard of an alien

invasion.

Jack tapped his comms. ‘I’m bringing in the girl. May have company on my

tail when I do.’

When Jack dragged Isla out to the airstrip, he reached down, threw her

over his shoulder again, and ran towards the rear of the hotel.

Anderson rounded the corner. ‘Hey! What the—’ She lifted her rifle. ‘Stop!’

She fired a warning shot above Jack’s head.

Directly behind Anderson the helicopters began their descent, whipping up a

tornado of dust, rocks and brush.

Anderson sprinted towards the hotel.

Jack could hardly see five metres in front any more. His vision was clouded

with black and yel ow dots, his head clanging with strident chords of tinny

music.

Dana pushed open the hotel gates. Jack charged through. Dana fired a

series of shots at Anderson, who hurled herself behind a copse of brush.

Jack dropped Isela onto a lounge chair and helped Dana close and bar the

gates.

‘Now what?’ asked Dana, freeing Isela.

‘I need you to give me the notebook, Isela. I know you have it,’ said Jack,

his knees buckling. ‘Give me a minute.’

‘You can have five,’ said Cash, leading the others through the tropical

gardens to the cabana where Jack was down, his eyes closed, his heart

racing one minute then slowing, almost stopping, the next.

Gwen looked as bad as Jack felt. She was being carried between Eva and

Vlad, taking two steps on her own then being dragged and carried for

two.

‘What happened?’ When Jack sat up a wave of nausea pul ed his head back

against the pil ows.

‘She punched Hol is,’ said Vlad. ‘Thought he was her husband, I think.’

Hol is was bringing up the rear of the line with Sam, each had assault rifles

criss-crossed over their shoulders. ‘On my honour, I did not touch the lady.’

‘I upped her dosage,’ said Eva.

‘Hey everyone! It’s Jack,’ grinned Gwen. ‘I missed you, Jack!’

‘Why do you need to see my grandfather’s notebook?’ asked Isela, sitting

on the edge of the lounger next to Jack.

‘It’s my notebook, Isela. A long time ago, on this mountain, your grandfather

saved my life. He held on to the notebook for me.’

‘So you are *el cóndor* ? From the stories my mother tel s?’ Isela sucked her

upper lip, a movement so childish that Jack received a vivid flash of her sitting

cross-legged on a dusty tiled floor, listening wide-eyed to her mother. Isela

searched Jack’s face suspiciously – trying to reconcile this wild, infuriating

stranger with the heroes of her childhood chronicles. Sensing his moment,

Jack licked a finger, and traced in the air the pattern of overlapping circles.

Recognising the symbol, Isela grinned, and dug around in her garments, pul ing

the notebook out of a pocket along with a handful of spare ammunition. She

handed Jack the notebook.

‘Thank you,’ said Jack. As he closed his fingers over the book, he heard a

deep sonorous boom.

‘The *cóndor* ,’ said Hol is, ‘That’s a nickname with some cachet.’

‘Do you actual y know what a condor is?’ asked Cash, moving to the gates

where Dana stood guard, the drone of the helicopters shaking the hacienda’s

wal s while they loaded the wounded.

‘Four under par?’

‘It’s a bloody vulture, a bird that feeds on the dead,’ said Cash.

‘It’s a sacred bird to the Cuari, to my mother,’ said Isela. ‘We believe that

the *cóndor* comes from the heavens and it can take messages back and forth

between the three worlds. It is the key to keeping the universe in balance.’

Jack careful y unfolded the cloth, and was shocked to see that tucked in the

back were a series of letters that Renso had written over the years to Jack.

‘Were you the friend that my grandfather wrote those letters to al those

years ago?’

‘I loved your grandfather, Isela.’

‘He loved you too,’ said Isela. She stood and held out her hand. ‘Come. I’l

take you to my mother.’

‘Thank you,’ said Jack. Before crossing the lush courtyard with Isela, Jack

skimmed across the pages, tore out the relevant ones, and handed them to

Vlad. ‘Do what you need to do.’

Cash sent Hol is and Sam to watch the other gates. ‘If the CIA want this girl

bad enough, they’l charge in and take her. Jack, we have less than four hours

to get you up the mountain.’

69

LEAVING GWEN STRETCHED on a lounger singing in Welsh to herself under the

watchful eyes of Eva and Vlad, Jack trailed behind Isela inside the main

house. His field of vision was contracting. Running ahead of him, Isela looked

as if she was moving along a narrow tube. The ache in Jack’s joints and the

drumming in his head had worsened. He hobbled across the foyer.

‘Jack,’ said Cash into his earpiece, ‘it looks like the helicopters are going to

have to make one more run. We’re safe from Captain Anderson’s unit until

then. She’s got a guard on the edge of the canyon. She knows we’re stil in the

compound.’

Isela led Jack along a narrow side passageway decorated in blue and

white-flecked wal paper and a plush carpeted floor.

‘The wal s and the ceiling in this part of the house are al soundproofed and

shaded to make it easier on my mother.’

They stopped outside a pair of arched double-doors with the three-circle

symbol that Gwen had carved on her forearm displayed in the centre.

‘What’s wrong with your mother?’ asked Jack, even though he already

knew.

‘The doctors have a long list, but they say the main disease is vitiligo. She

can’t go out in the sun. She has no… no…’ She was struggling for the word in

English. ‘ *Color en piel* ?’

‘Pigment?’

Isela nodded. ‘She has no pigment, so she burns up in the sun. Oh, and

she’s sensitive to sounds and touch and so many other things. It’s why I want

to get away from this place.’

‘Why?’

‘Because it is the mountain that’s making her sick and one day it wil make

me sick too. My grandmother said so, and my mother says so. My father

refused to name me after my mother and grandmother because he believes

the name is cursed.'

'What should you have been named, Isela?'

'My Cuari name is Gaia.'

Jack flipped to the pages with the most writing in his notebook. There it

was. Her grandmother's name scribbled across the page, the guide Jack now

recal ed had taken him into the mountain to sacrifice him to the Helix

Intel igence, to the astral force locked inside the Earth's core.

In the line under the name Gaia, Jack had scribbled, *means goddess of the*

Earth.

'I wil go inside first to prepare her for you.'

*

When Jack entered the room, the first thing he noticed was the silence. Every

noise in his head shut down. Then he realised his knees were no longer

aching, his heartbeat had steadied itself, and the rock in his gut had gone.

The wal s were dressed in a similar flecked fabric to the hal way but inside,

instead of blue and white, the colours were maroon and gold. The carpet was

thick, soft and black, and the tal arched windows were made of smoked

glass. The view of the mountain and a tiled fountain were visible from the

draped four poster bed where Isela's mother was propped in front of

layers of

soft pil ows.

‘I’ve been expecting you,’ said Gaia. ‘The mountain won’t wait much longer.’

‘Then you know what’s happening? To the world?’ asked Jack. He tasted

ginger.

‘Of course, it has been marked in the mountain since the beginning of time,

noted in the beads by my ancestors and written in the scrol s by yours. It’s

part of the prophecy.’

‘But then you also must understand what has to happen.’

She smiled sadly at Jack and then at her daughter. ‘I’ve known my entire

existence. It is what a star guide is born to do. There are so few Cuari left.

The prophecy must be fulfil ed this time.’

Jack walked closer to the bed. Gaia let out a painful ear-piercing wail. Jack

quickly backed away.

‘Everything about you hurts me,’ she sobbed, her breath catching in her

throat.

‘Sit there,’ Isela said, pointing to a long red velvet couch in front of a wal of

cloth-bound books. Isela stroked her mother’s palm, calming her immediately.

Jack sat on the couch and studied the woman in the bed. She was

painful y

thin, but her beauty and sensuality were undeniable. Patches of her skin were

as white as Jack's and others were as brown as Isela's, the mottled texture

and the uneven tones of her skin only enhancing her radiance. Gaia's hair was

jet black, easily reaching her waist, but it was her eyes that Jack found so

mesmerising, so enchanting. They were deep midnight black. The longer he

stared at this woman – this being on the bed whose spirit was ancient and

ageless, prehistoric and primal – the more clearly his memories of the

mountain and its power fitted into place, and the more he doubted the success

of his plan.

Jack had got some of it terribly wrong.

70

Swansea, same day

RHYS LEANED OVER Anwen's cot, tucked her in, settling her stuffed bear close to

her side. He kissed his finger and touched it to Anwen's heart, and for a while

he stayed in that position staring at the wonder of his daughter until she

snuffled, rol ed onto her side, and high-kicked her blanket to the bottom of the

crib.

Rhys smiled, lifting out the blanket. ‘You’ve definitely got your mum’s legs.’

Downstairs, he switched on the TV news, and stared at the footage of the

tower of water shooting into the heavens. The scaffolding enveloping it looked

as if an oil rig had been constructed around it, lights blazing from the navy

ships, making it easy to watch the tower of rock slowly but surely engulfing

the entire jet stream. The press, the crazies, and the curious had al stayed

bobbing out there in the sea, as they had at the other geysers, despite most

governments asking those closest to the chimneys to evacuate further inland.

And somewhere out there, Jack and Gwen were fighting to right the world.

Rhys sat down on the sofa, and prayed that the morning would come.

71

Southern Peru, same day

STANDING ON THE wide porch of the hacienda with his gun over his shoulder,

smoking a Cuban cigar, Cash wondered how they were ever going to make it

up the mountain given Jack’s deteriorating condition, never mind what he

planned to do when he got there.

Savouring every puff of his cigar, Cash stared out at the Pacific. The late-

afternoon sun was lingering over the horizon as if considering whether or not

to be swal owed by the coming darkness.

According to Shel ey's calculations, they had three hours until the vent

chimneys would be sealed.

The climbing procession was organising with little fuss in the foyer when

Dana alerted Cash in his earpiece that Captain Anderson's team were

preparing to breach the south wal .

'If you're going, love,' she said, 'I'd say now would be good. Sam and I can

hold them off until you get out of the compound.'

'Then what?' said Cash.

'Then we'l improvise.'

Cash waved at Dana, then pinched the end of his cigar, setting the rest of it

on the edge of the veranda. 'I expect everyone to be there when I return.'

Inside, he told Jack they had to move. Now.

Gaia insisted that the prophesied ritual be fol owed to the exact glyph.

Dressed in a black suede jumpsuit with padded earmuffs secured under her

hood, she and Isela would lead them. After some trial and error, she was able

to tolerate Eva more comfortably than any of the others, so Eva was

positioned in front along with Isela.

Jack refused to wear the traditional Cuari tunic. 'If the world is going to end

tonight, I'm going out with my trousers on.' He sent Vlad to retrieve his coat

from the rear gates.

Jack was unsteady on his feet and close to incoherent for significant chunks

of time, so Cash and Hol is decided they were the best equipped to handle

him.

Vlad was travel ing with Gwen, who was more than a little wobbly on her

feet. Al of them, including Isela, carried weapons.

Twenty minutes into their climb, they reached the steep canyon hiking pass,

the trail that centuries ago had been used by the great Inca warriors leading

their sacrifices up the mountain.

Jack's field of vision looked like a Jackson Pol ock painting, dripping with

dots and dol ops of blinding colours. Snarling voices were screaming in his

head and he could hardly walk, his knees crippling him. With Cash and Hol is

supporting him on either side, they tramped into the rocky jungle path.

Gunfire erupted from the compound below.

Eva stopped at the sound, but Cash urged her on.

'Dana and Sam know what they're doing. We need to keep moving, Eva.'

Eva was glad she had been put in the lead a good few metres in front of

Vlad because she was afraid that her own heightening sexual desire, which

was getting more intense the higher they climbed, would put Vlad in more

danger than the soldiers snapping at their heels. Eva was breathing heavily

when they entered a clearing at the top of the canyon pass.

The vol eys of gunfire echoing from the compound below were almost

continuous.

‘They must have breached the wal ,’ yel ed Cash. ‘Let’s go, people. Let’s get

this done.’

When they final y arrived at the deserted ruin of the Cuari vil age beneath

the mountain’s plateau, the darkness had descended like a lid on the basin of

the mountain only a few hundred metres above them.

With the descending darkness came a change in Gaia that was startling.

Her steps quickened, her breathing became less laboured. She shrugged off

Eva and Isela and bounded towards the final leg of the canyon pass. Jack, on

the other hand, was being dragged between Cash and Hol is. No one was

speaking. Only the bursts of gunfire from the compound below punctuated

their progress.

The air in the clearing was rank with sulphur and ash. Jack tasted rotten

meat and sour milk and ginger, the taste of the mountain. Then the gunfire

ceased.

‘Cash!’ yel ed Dana. ‘Anderson’s coming.’ Then her comms went silent.

‘Jack,’ said Cash, leaning him against the ruined wal of a brick cairn. ‘You’re

going to have to do your best to go on without us. Hol is and I wil hold this

clearing for as long as we can.’

Jack nodded, guessing what Cash was saying to him, but the words felt like

water on his face, splashes of yel ow wrapped in despair. Jack kept brushing

his hands over his cheeks, nodding that he understood. When he looked at his

hands, he saw that his tears were pink.

Accepting Gaia’s offer of support, Jack linked his arm through hers. Then he

turned and saluted Cash, who’d taken a position at the mouth of the canyon,

tucking himself under the jungle’s canopy.

‘Remember,’ said Jack, choking the words out, ‘make their progress difficult,

but don’t shoot to kil . They’re only fol owing orders.’ Cash nodded and

returned Jack’s salute.

Jack winked and blew a kiss to Hol is, who caught it in his fist. With Vlad

and Gwen tottering behind, they climbed the final metres to the basin of the

sacred mountain.

72

THE DARKNESS ENGULFED the rag-tag gang as soon as they emerged from the

canyon pass and onto the plateau. Eva lost her footing and fel , tumbling off

the path and into a tangle of trumpet trees bordering the steep ridge. Vlad

abandoned Gwen and slithered down the hil side after her.

‘Are you OK?’

She smiled, nodded and reluctantly broke free, scrambling to catch up with

Jack, who was slumped a body’s length from the lip of the massive mountain

basin. Eva could barely make out Isela up ahead already marking out their

positions with a ceremonial feathered brush, the peak of her markings leading

down into the mountain. Like her mother, the higher the motley crew had

climbed, the more compliant Isela had become, the mountain’s sway over her

as strong as it was over her mother. At this altitude, a thin sheen of ice coated

the edges of the rocks surrounding the basin itself, the mountain etched in

silver.

‘Jack, where’s Gaia?’ asked Eva

Jack struggled to his knees, pul ing the night-vision goggles he’d taken from

one of the guards from his pocket. ‘Give these to Cash,’ he said to her. ‘He

may need them.’

Jack’s eyes were red-rimmed, bloodshot and he wanted nothing more than

to have the cacophony of noise in his head be silent if only for one minute, one

second, one beat of his pounding heart.

‘Jack!’ This time Eva screamed. ‘Where’s Gaia? We can’t lose her. Not now.

’

‘She’s right there.’

Eva heard a low growl and in terror dragged Jack from the edge of the

basin against an outcropping of rocks as a mountain lion, a sleek black puma,

pounced from the jungle landing next to Isela. The puma was bathed in a faint

yel ow light, transforming the plateau into a movie newsreel, the crew, Gwen

and Jack, players on a sacrificial stage.

‘Oh my God,’ said Eva, backing away from Jack and closer to Vlad and

Gwen.

Isela put her hand out and gently stroked the puma’s neck. It nuzzled

against Isela for a beat and then it turned, darted to the rim of the basin and

roared, the sound bouncing off the steep rock wal s and waking the mountain.

Seconds later, the ground began to shake violently, throwing Vlad, Eva and

Gwen to the rocky ground where they frantical y crawled to the massive

boulders for something to anchor themselves against. A flaming fissure broke

from inside the basin and shot up along the edge of the mountain, circling it

once, twice. And then the fissure shot out across the plateau fol owing the

area Isela had marked with the ceremonial feathers, creating three interlacing

fiery circles, the peak of the third one descending into the flaming rim of the

mountain itself.

The puma leapt from the edge and landed in the centre of the top circle.

The entire mountain trembled, a thunderous roar bursting from the bowels of

the Earth, spewing ash and rock out across the plateau.

Gwen scrambled forward, grabbing Jack by the arms. ‘Do you know what

you’re doing?’

‘Each circle represents the three worlds that must be kept in balance for the

Earth to survive. The world above, the world below and the world here and

now. I was wrong. I thought that the Helix Intel igence – the astral force – was

our enemy, that it was trying to break free, but she’s not. She needs this

sacrifice, needs our genetic and cel ular codes to heal herself. If Renso had let

her have me al those years ago then we wouldn't be here now.'

Gwen had been here before. She'd seen Jack walk into the shadow of a

demon and stare into a void in the heart of the Earth. And always – when

anyone else would show fear, panic, or indecision – suddenly, this most heavy-

hearted of men would become cold and rational. He'd clench his jaw and

square up to the universe.

Jack squeezed her shoulder. 'Gwen Cooper, you know the dril .'

'You bloody idiot,' said Gwen.

'Yup.' Jack nodded, kissing her.

Gwen brushed his hand and stepped away, walking on wobbly legs with as

much determination and dignity as she could muster to the boulders where

Vlad and Eva were clinging, shaken by the worsening tremors. She dropped

behind the safety of the jagged outcropping next to Vlad and Eva. With images

of Rhys and Anwen in her mind, Gwen prayed for a tomorrow. She glanced

back at Jack, calmly waiting, and then she cleared her throat. 'Come on, kids,'

she said. 'Let's get out of here before the world ends.'

Jack was about to step into the circle that was burning next to his feet when

Captain Anderson charged out of the canyon pass and fired a vol ey of shots

into the air.

‘Hold it!’

The puma leapt from the lip of the mountain, flew across the air and

knocked Anderson back against her men. With her massive paws on

Anderson’s shoulders she roared, opening her mouth as wide as the

smouldering circles themselves.

Cash broke through the dense jungle brush and fired at the massive cat that

was about to swal ow Anderson whole. The shot hit the puma’s hind leg. It

howled. The ground thundered and shook in response, throwing anyone stil

standing off their feet. Fissures were shooting out across the plateau from

every circle, crumbling and crushing anything and anyone in their path.

‘No!’ yel ed Jack. ‘Don’t shoot her.’

The puma leapt off Anderson and pounced into the lead circle. Jack turned

and watched as Gaia now stood in the centre of the blazing rings, blood

dripping from a bul et wound in her thigh.

‘I don’t know what weirdness is going on here,’ said Anderson, scrambling to

her feet, ‘but give me the girl and you can al go about your private orgy when

she and my unit are clear.’

Jack turned and stared in horror as Isela began sinking into the earth, being

pul ed towards the edge of the basin next to him.

‘No, Isela! Not you,’ he screamed, his throat raw. ‘You don’t have to be part

of this.’

‘But the sacrifice must be three,’ choked Isela, the smouldering ash

thickening around her. ‘Gaia, the puma from the darkness of the underworld,

you, the *cóndor* from the heavens, and someone of the Earth, bound

intimately to our world. There is no one else. It must be three. That’s the

prophesy.’

Overwhelmed with the intoxicating fumes, Isela col apsed to the ground,

silver veins shooting out of the mountain, darting along the smoking crevices

and binding Isela’s feet, then her legs in threads of silver light.

Suddenly Jack realised why the hydrothermal vents had been pulsing out

the ecto-hormone; it needed to find the third sacrifice, the female whose

connection to the Earth was strong, and who would be a worthy sacrifice.

But not a child. The universe could not take another child. He would not

al ow it to take a child again.

The pulsing veins of silver were whipping themselves round Jack’s ankles,

and he felt himself welcome them, the sensation as wonderful as he now

remembered it. Renso stepped into the circle with him, wrapped himself in his

arms, kissed his lips, then took his hands in his. Jack tasted lemons and felt

every fibre of his being ache with longing.

‘Get that girl out of there, now!’ screamed Anderson, shooting into the sky

because she didn’t know what else to do.

Jack was being sucked into the ground, being tugged towards the dark

abyss of the basin. He turned to the outcropping of rocks where Vlad and Eva

were hiding and watched in terror as Gwen shot out from their grasp, sprinted

across the clearing, hit a sheet of rock and leapt from it, landing in the circle

next to Isela.

‘Gwen! No,’ screamed Jack. He tried to clamber towards her, but his feet

were encased in the earth, wrapped in the tightening silver veins that were

dragging him fast towards the rim of the mountain. He threw himself flat on the

ground and stretched out his hands towards Gwen.

Behind him, the ground opened and the mountain swal owed Gaia, her

descent marked with a thunderous boom that bounced across the mountain

peaks.

Anderson dropped her gun. Loosening her rappel ing wire from her kit, she

dodged the widening crevices on the plateau to get to Gwen, who ripped at

the tendrils and veins, freeing Isela from the earth's grip. At the edge of the

circle, Anderson shot the hook into the trunk of a smouldering Kapok tree,

tossing the other end to Gwen, who hooked it onto Isela's belt. Anderson

slammed her palm on the switch and the winch dragged an unconscious Isela

from the circle of fire into Anderson's arms.

'Gwen, what are you doing?' screamed Jack, most of the lower half of his

body mummified in silver threads, the pain and the pleasure indistinguishable.

'What any good mother would do,' she sobbed, her eyes stinging from the

sulphur and the burning chemicals in the rock, 'saving the world for my

children.'

A fissure shot from the lip of the mountain into the circle, pul ing Gwen to the

ground, the silver veins quickly mummifying her. She stretched out her hand

towards Jack, their fingers touching for a second, for the briefest moment in

time.

'You made my world a better place, Jack.'

The earth shook, the circles tightened around Jack and Gwen like fiery

lassos, pul ing them over the lip and into the vast gaping abyss.

*

Rhys woke up suddenly, and stared in horror at the television in front of him.

The news channel showed the picture out at sea, of the chimney of rock

growing around the fountain of water appearing to spin out of control, rising

higher and higher above the jet and then folding in on itself, fal ing down like a

pile of building blocks, fal ing in on itself and the sea, sending an enormous

wave crashing out towards Swansea.

He was about to turn for the stairs, run to Anwen and carry her down to the

basement, when a tower of silver threads, like electrical filaments, shot up

from the sea, spiral ing around the disintegrating chimney and then exploding

like a flowery burst of bril iant fireworks, blasting the remnants of the chimney

in a mil ion points of light.

The Ice Maiden

73

Off the coast of Miami, two weeks later

'PERMISSION TO COME aboard, Captain,' said Jack, climbing off a classy speed

boat being driven by an expensively dressed sailor.

'Are you sure that's what you want?' asked Hol is, steadying the boat as

Jack climbed out and onto the *Ice Maiden*'s platform.

'Permission granted,' said Cash from the deck above.

Jack laughed and embraced Hol is. 'I'm more than sure. Besides I've been

missing your po'boy sandwiches.'

'I could go for one of them too,' said Sam, leaning over the portside next to

Dana.

'I'm al about sharing,' laughed Jack.

'It's going to be a long noisy voyage, I can tel ,' said Cash, grinning and

slapping Jack's back. 'Glad to have Torchwood on board.'

Climbing up the ladder to the *Ice Maiden*'s deck, Jack hesitated. He had a

sudden memory of the horrible climb out of the smoking volcano where he'd

lain, broken and mummified for days, waiting in agony for the Earth, the

mountain and his body to heal, believing then that with Gwen's sacrifice his

heart never would.

And then he'd rol ed over the lip of the basin into the hazy ash-fil ed sunlight

and he'd seen her, sitting on a deckchair next to Vlad and Eva in the cracked

and swol en clearing, waiting for him as they had been every day since the

mountain had taken him.

When Jack had walked out of the white haze, Vlad nudged Gwen who

scrambled out of the deckchair and raced into his arms.

Suddenly, Shel ey morphed at Gwen's side, looking in every way identical to

her, including a chromosome sequence that Vlad had coded into the avatar

mimicking Gwen's genetic code, using the information in Jack's notebook.

'Fuck – me!' said Gwen, who had very little memory of the previous few

weeks.

'That program is now ful y functional,' said Shel ey.

'Luckily,' said Vlad, leaning over and kissing Eva, 'I don't need it.'

Acknowledgements

To bring Captain Jack and *Torchwood* alive in these pages was a distinct

privilege if a bit daunting. We may have an inside track on the Captain, but

Torchwood's creator, Russel T Davies, remains the Titan in the *Torchwood*

universe and ours. We salute you, sir.

Many thanks to the folks behind the publication of *Exodus Code*, especial y

to Steve Tribe and James Goss, our terrific editors, who are masters of the

Torchwood universe, and to Albert DePetril o and Nicholas Payne at BBC

Books. Thanks also to Gary Russel and al at BBC Wales for al owing us to

tel this tale in the first place.

A team of talented friends and family toil behind the scenes to make it

possible for us to col aborate on our many projects. First, we're sending cake

and hearty thanks to Gavin Barker of Gavin Barker and Associates Inc.,

Georgina Capel of Capel and Land Ltd, and Rhys Livesy.

Without Kevin Casey, Carole would spend al day in her pyjamas, eating

only chocolate raisins, and getting in fights with her imaginary friends (there

are many).

Without Scott Gil , John would not know the wonder of a bacon buttie

on a

Sunday morning.

And without Marion, John, Clare (welcome to Team Barrowman, Casey) and

Turner, we would think everything we did was funny and worth sharing.

Final y, the histories of the ancient peoples of Peru are rich ones, but the

Cuari tribe in this novel have no relationship to the city in Peru and the people

living there, then and now. The Cuari living within these pages are purely

fictional.

John & Carole

Available now from BBC Books:

TORCH WOOD

The Torchwood Archives

Gary Russel

£14.99 ISBN 978 1 846 07459 2

Pack Animals

Peter Anghelides

£6.99 ISBN 978 1 846 07574 2

SkyPoint

Phil Ford

£6.99 ISBN 978 1 846 07575 9

Almost Perfect

James Goss

£6.99 ISBN 978 1 846 07573 5

Into the Silence

Sarah Pinborough

£6.99 ISBN 978 1 846 07753 1

Bay of the Dead

Mark Morris

£6.99 ISBN 978 1 846 07737 1

The House that Jack Built

Guy Adams

£6.99 ISBN 978 1 846 07739 5

The Encyclopedia

Gary Russel

£14.99 ISBN 978 1 846 07764 7

Risk Assessment

James Goss

£6.99 ISBN 978 1 846 07783 8

The Undertaker's Gift

Trevor Baxendale

£6.99 ISBN 978 1 846 07782 1

Consequences

James Moran, Joseph Lidster, Andrew Cartmel,

Sarah Pinborough and David Llewel yn

£6.99 ISBN 978 1 846 07784 5

First Born

James Goss

£6.99 ISBN 978 1 849 90283 0

Long Time Dead

Sarah Pinborough

£6.99 ISBN 978 1 849 90284 7

The Men Who Sold the World

Guy Adams

£6.99 ISBN 978 1 849 90285 4

This ebook is copyright material and must not be copied, reproduced,

transferred, distributed, leased, licensed or publicly performed or used in any

way except as specifical y permitted in writing by the publishers, as al owed

under the terms and conditions under which it was purchased or as strictly

permitted by applicable copyright law. Any unauthorised distribution or use of

this text may be a direct infringement of the author's and publisher's rights and

those responsible may be liable in law accordingly.

Version 1.0

Epub ISBN 9781409071457

www.randomhouse.co.uk

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Published in 2012 by BBC Books, an imprint of Ebury Publishing.

A Random House Group Company

Copyright © John Barrowman and Carole E. Barrowman 2012

John Barrowman and Carole E. Barrowman assert their moral right to be

identified as the authors of the Work in accordance with Sections 77 and 78 of

the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

Torchwood is a BBC Worldwide Production for the BBC and Starz Originals.

Executive producers: Russel T Davies, Julie Gardner and Jane Tranter

Original series created by Russel T Davies, and developed and produced by

BBC Cymru Wales. BBC, ‘Torchwood’ and the Torchwood logo are trademarks

of the British Broadcasting Corporation and are used under licence.

Al rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a

retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic,

mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission

of the copyright owner.

The Random House Group Limited Reg. No. 954009

Addresses for companies within the Random House Group can be found at

www.randomhouse.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 846 07907 8